

Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash

level.16 Without Even Knowing the Reason for Our Good-bye



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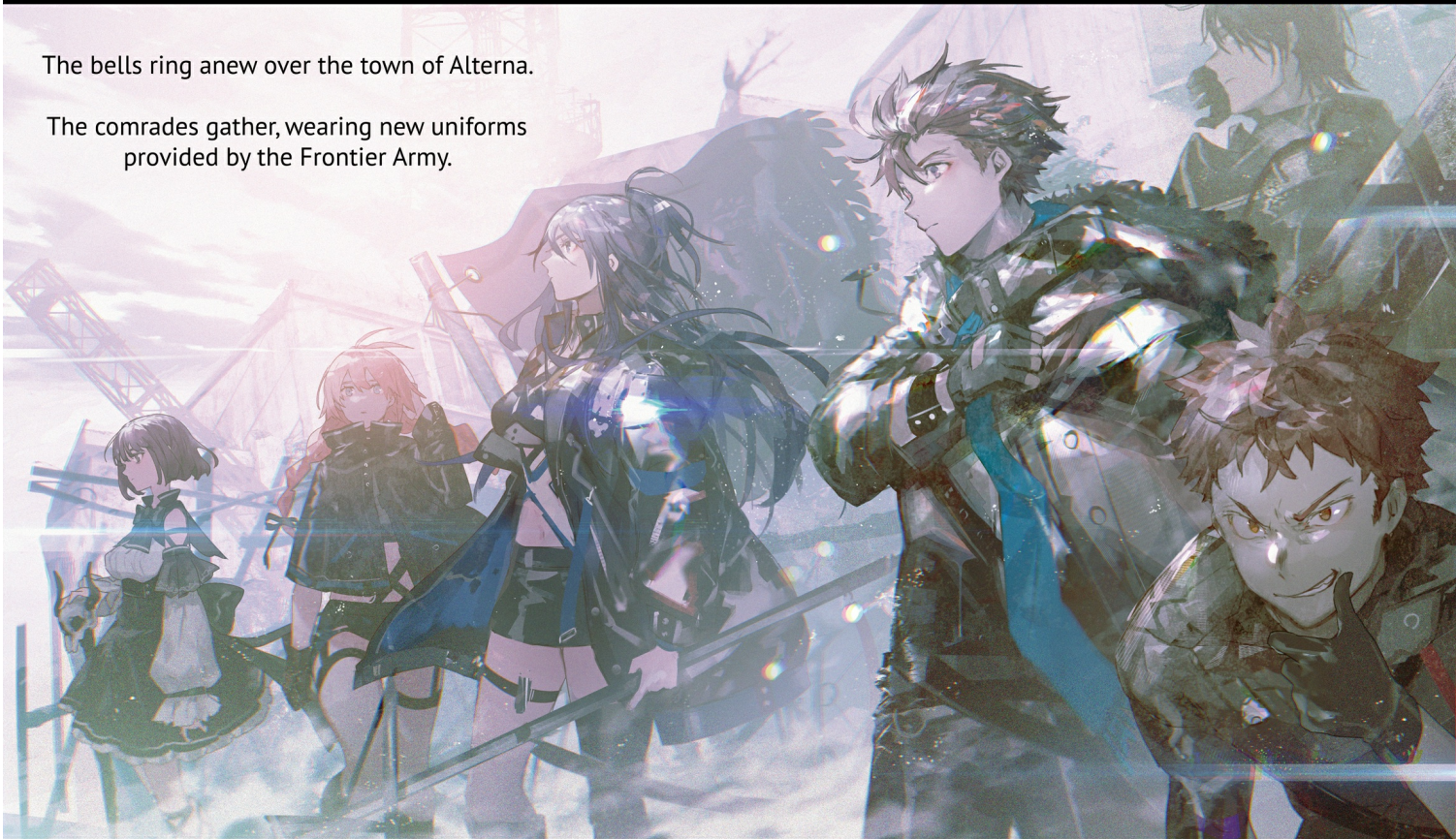
Illustrations by
Eiri Shirai

**Grimgar of
Fantasy and Ash**

Level. Sixteen

The bells ring anew over the town of Alterna.

The comrades gather, wearing new uniforms
provided by the Frontier Army.





*"Are you okay? It doesn't
hurt anymore? Haru?
How are you?"*

*"...Oh, uh,
s-sure...
I'm good."*

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1. She Was There

Deadhead Watching Keep was surrounded by walls on all sides, and the main keep itself had three watchtowers jutting out of it. Haruhiro had made his way inside one of them, climbing a spiral staircase.

According to Merry, Haruhiro and his party had once participated in an operation that captured Deadhead Watching Keep. Did that mean he had climbed up and down this spiral staircase before? He didn't remember it at all, and the thought didn't inspire any strong feelings in him. Since he was coming at this with a fresh perspective, that allowed him to focus on what he was seeing and hearing now, and any other hints. That was one way to look at it. It was probably best to think about it that way.

Not so much because that was a positive, optimistic way of seeing it, but more because he had to accept reality for what it was.

What the hell is going on here?

And, Why is this happening?

And, Just give me a break, already.

And, I'm getting sick of all of this.

Honestly, he couldn't help feeling like that. He was human, after all. Of course he would.

But still, those were just feelings. Emotions that changed all of the time. They shifted. It wouldn't do him any good to let himself be swayed by them.

After losing someone who was precious — probably incredibly precious to him — there was a hole left in his heart.

When he peered into that void, feelings of unbearable sadness and pain took hold of him.

Maybe I should just jump down that hole.

He even had stupid ideas like that. He was only human. He couldn't help it.

That was why Haruhiro was doing his best to ignore that emptiness left in his heart. Whenever he accidentally glimpsed it, he subtly averted his eyes. He could not afford to stare into it.

When he reached the end of the spiral staircase, there was a round room. This was the top floor. The windows let him look out in all directions.

There wasn't a person to be found in this room, or in any other room for that matter, and no inhuman creatures, either.

"I kind of expected it, but still..."

Not only were there no signs of life, there was no furniture, either. There were a handful of boxes and barrels lying over by the edge of the room. He checked them, just to be sure, but they were all empty.

There was what you might have called a hatch in the ceiling, close to the edge. It was a square door-like thing. Maybe it provided access to the roof? He wasn't tall enough to reach it, though.

Haruhiro piled up the barrels and boxes and opened the hatch. There were iron rungs bolted into the sides of a narrow, vertical tube that was maybe a meter across. It seemed to come to a dead end, but there was likely another hatch or something similar up there.

He clambered up the ladder. The tube was less than two meters tall, though.

There was another hatch at the other end, as expected. When he pushed it open, it brought him out onto the roof.

From up there he could look over the surrounding plains and the forest to the south, and farther afield he could see Alterna and the Forbidden Tower that stood on the hill next to the town.

Deadhead Watching Keep had been held by the orcs until it was taken by the Kingdom of Arabakia's Frontier Army and Volunteer Soldier Corps in a battle four or five years ago. Then, not long ago, around two months back, the orcs had reclaimed it.

This keep was six kilometers from Alterna. Only six kilometers.

The orcs, and by extension the Alliance of Kings, had never stopped

monitoring their enemy, humanity. Though all they did was watch. Did they think humans were no significant threat, and that was why they never made any real moves against them? The fact that this was a long way from the orc and undead strongholds might have played into it, too. Near Alterna there were goblins in Damuro, and kobolds in the Cyrene Mines. The orcs deployed their soldiers to Deadhead Watching Keep and Riverside Iron Fortress. If the humans just stayed in Alterna, and made no concerted attempt to spread north, there was no need to commit a large force to exterminating them. Humanity was insignificant. Maybe that was how the orcs had viewed them.

There were three watchtowers. Someone had climbed up onto the neighboring tower.

No, not just someone, it was Neal, a scout in the Kingdom of Arabakia's Expeditionary Force.

"Hey!"

Neal noticed Haruhiro and waved. What was he smiling for? It rubbed Haruhiro the wrong way. No, he couldn't let it bug him. It was better not to let his emotions dictate how he dealt with the man.

"How were things on your end?" he asked Neal.

"Same as yours. Probably."

"It looks like the keep's an empty shell."

"Even if we were to search every nook and cranny, we wouldn't have much to show for the effort. Should we head back?"

"Yeah."

The operation to retake Alterna had been carried out under the assumption that there were orcs at Deadhead Watching Keep. That had necessitated the town be secured as quickly as possible.

Close the north gate. Don't let them in. They'd even formed plans for what to do in the event that orcs from Deadhead Watching Keep arrived during the mission.

But ultimately, the orcs never made a move.

More than that, the supposed orcish garrison that was supposed to be at Deadhead Watching Keep had vanished by the time the battle was over.

There was no sign of them from the outside, but intelligence had indicated there was a contingent of about five hundred orcs at the keep. That was a major threat, and one the Expeditionary Force could not afford to ignore. If they just assumed they were gone, but the orcs were actually lying in wait inside the fortress, set to attack when an opportunity came, it would be a serious problem.

In response to that, Haruhiro and Neal the scout were sent to Deadhead Watching Keep, but the orcs really were gone. They didn't know where.

It was entirely possible they'd be ordered to find them. The thought of that made Haruhiro feel depressed. It wasn't exactly that Haruhiro didn't give a damn about the orcs, or that they were of no interest to him whatsoever, but he didn't want to be separated from his comrades for so long. It was better if they could operate as a group. That was the feeling he had.

Jin Mogis.

The red-haired general was an ambitious one. He didn't hesitate to do whatever it took to reach his goals. He'd take advantage of anyone he could. And when he was done with them, he'd have no trouble tossing them aside.

The world was a big place. Of course there were guys like that out there. That was fine. Haruhiro wasn't about to tell him how to live his life.

There was just one problem.

The general was trying to use Haruhiro and his comrades. They were being taken advantage of now, at this very moment. Why was Haruhiro here with Neal, at Deadhead Watching Keep? He'd been sent. On the general's order.

He climbed down from the watchtower, and met up with Neal outside.

"I'd heard the orcs were a tough race. Maybe they're more cowardly than I thought."

"I guess that depends on where they went. They may not have run away."

"Well, they didn't abandon their supplies, and it doesn't look like they left in a

rush. I guess they're more organized than the goblins, huh?"

Neal was a nasty piece of work. But when he was in front of the general, he was beyond subservient.

According to him, on the other side of the Tenryu Mountains, in the south of the Kingdom of Arabakia's mainland, they were fighting an intense war against barbarian tribes. Jin Mogis had fought the southern barbarians for more than ten years, and in recognition of his accomplishments he was given charge of a special unit known as the Black Hounds.

The Black Hounds' primary task was not to fight barbarians. It was to capture deserters. Or to execute them. It may have been a necessary evil, required to maintain order in the military, but it was still repulsive.

Neal said he'd been in the Black Hounds. That meant the general had trained him. They didn't act particularly close, though. Neal feared the general more than anyone. That's what it seemed like.

"All right. Let's get going, Haruhiro."

Neal started walking. Haruhiro didn't want to walk in front of him. But if he walked directly behind him, Neal would be wary. So Haruhiro trailed after him, but off to the side.

"Heh," Neal loosened up his shoulders and chuckled quietly. Haruhiro didn't have to respond, but he did without meaning to.

"...What is it?"

Neal glanced back at him.

"You're good."

His unshaven face twisted, the corners of his mouth turning upwards.

I shouldn't engage with him. I don't want to talk.

That was what Haruhiro thought, but Neal felt differently.

"I'll bet your teacher was good, too. Taught you a bit of *everything*."

What did he think was so funny, laughing like that? There was nothing humorous about it. Why was he laughing? It wasn't funny at all.

Haruhiro took relaxed breaths, trying not to disrupt his gait. He saw what was going on here. Neal was trying to get a rise out of him. What was so fun about that? What was the point of it? Haruhiro couldn't understand, but he also wasn't Neal. He was a totally different person. Thank goodness. Though scouts and thieves were similar, that was the only thing the two of them had in common. It was obvious why he didn't understand it.

They crossed the barren plains into the forest.

Neal came to a stop.

"Still, it's a shame."

Not wanting to walk in front of Neal, Haruhiro was forced to stop, too.

He didn't ask what. Haruhiro had no intention of saying another word.

"She was a good woman."

Neal's face was turned half towards Haruhiro, seeking agreement.

"Right?" He spread his arms wide. "It's such a waste. If she was gonna die, I should've screwed her, even if that meant I had to take her by force. Maybe then I'd be a bit sentimental about it. Might even've cried. You might not think so, but I'm—"

Stay cool, stay cool, Haruhiro thought to himself.

Barbara-sensei would have shrugged it off with ease. Not that he really knew that. Haruhiro didn't know Barbara-sensei that well.

He didn't remember her, after all.

He'd forgotten.

And that really bothered him.

Like a dam breaking, the feelings he had been trying to suppress burst forth, and he moved with explosive speed. It only took an instant.

Haruhiro slipped past Neal, and got behind him. Before the other could react, he'd planted his heel in the back of the scout's knee. He'd caught him almost completely by surprise. Not many people could resist a strong blow to the back of the knee. He wrapped his arms around Neal's neck as the man stumbled, and

put him in a rear naked choke.



Haruhiro could rapidly render him unconscious. He could even kill him.

If he'd had a weapon in his hand, what might he have done instead? Haruhiro probably would have killed Neal rather than just choking him.

He didn't murder him immediately. His reason kicked in at the last moment.

"Sorry."

Haruhiro released Neal before the man could start struggling.

"I let the blood rush to my head there, and it just... happened."

Haruhiro pushed Neal away, and backed off. He repeatedly rubbed his face with his hand and arm.

He'd gotten mad, and nearly done something irreversible. Was this another aspect of him? He'd have to be more careful in the future.

"Why you..."

Neal glared at Haruhiro, and placed his hand on the hilt of his dagger. There was a pulsing vein on his forehead. The anger was misplaced, but Haruhiro still had to deal with it.

"Nah, man. You're the one who started this. Barbara-sensei was my... I dunno, my teacher, I guess?"

"Teacher my ass. You two had something going on between you, I'll bet."

"I don't care if you believe me, but no, we didn't."

We probably didn't, he thought.

Haruhiro didn't remember, so he couldn't be completely certain that nothing had ever happened between them.

I feel like there was nothing. There shouldn't have been. There wasn't... right?

Whether there was or wasn't, it made no difference now.

Barbara-sensei was gone.

Dead.

Honestly, he couldn't help but think, *Why now? Why here?*

He felt a pain deep in his nose, and his eyes were getting hot.

How could he let himself cry in front of Neal? This was the worst.

“...Please. Just stop. Don’t say anything else about Barbara-sensei...”

Haruhiro looked down. *Am I going to cry?* he wondered, but apparently not. He was sad. It made him want to cry. But for whatever reason, he couldn’t.

“It’s not like you just lost your mom,” Neal spat and then started walking.

Neal, who unlike Haruhiro was born in Grimgar, had parents. No, Haruhiro and his group must have had parents, too. They just had no recollection of them.

Was Neal’s mother alive and well? Haruhiro had a feeling she might have already passed away.

Even a guy like Neal had to have felt sad when he lost his mother. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t have brought it up as a comparison.

“My mom, huh?”

Haruhiro followed Neal, a grim smile on his face.

It hurt.

It hurt so bad he wanted to cry, but all he could do was smile.

If Haruhiro’d told her, “You’re like a mother to me,” how would Barbara-sensei have reacted?

Would she have gotten angry and said “I’m not *that* old”?

No, she wasn’t his mom. Not quite a big sister, either. Barbara-sensei was Barbara-sensei.

Haruhiro didn’t have a lot of memories of her taking care of him, or teaching him things. So why did he miss her so badly despite that?

He’d avenged her with his own hands, and he still couldn’t believe she was gone. No, he just didn’t want to accept it.

But accept it or not, she was lost to him.

Forever.

Even now that her body and soul had vanished, the feeling of how she had been taken from him lingered.

The gravity of that fact might diminish slowly with time.

But for now, it weighed heavily on Haruhiro.

2. The Existence of Death

The thieves' guild in Alterna's West Town. That day, in the darkness of a hidden room deep inside, Haruhiro had been alone with Barbara.

Or so he'd thought.

Once he explained the situation to her satisfaction, Barbara turned on the lights.

The secret room was divided not by walls, but by a specially treated, fireproof cloth. There were apparently several rooms like this in the thieves' guild. Only the high-ranking agents of the guild, called mentors, knew where all of them were.

The mentors, as their name suggested, guided and led the thieves. On top of that, they also provided intelligence to the Margrave and the higher-ups in the Frontier Army.

"Not many people realize it, but our thieves' guild is pretty involved politically."

That suggestive smile on Barbara's face was burned into Haruhiro's memory. It wouldn't fade so easily.

"I'm way more interested in sex than politics, though."

"Erm, that's enough kidding around..."

"You think I'm joking?"

Barbara touched a sensitive part of his anatomy.

"Whoa, hold on..."

Barbara seemed to enjoy seeing him get flustered.

"It's okay. You can moan a little. They won't be able to hear us outside. The room was built to be sure of it. That's why I'm extra fond of this place."

"It's true, they won't hear us outside."

When he heard another voice — clearly not Barbara's — say that, Haruhiro was shocked.

"Huh?! Wh-Wha... Huh? Wh-Who's there...?"

"I told you, didn't I?" Barbara cleared her throat mischievously. "The thieves' guild is a political organization. Thanks to that, we've learned to keep our public positions and private positions separate. We're secretive, you know? You'll have to learn to be the same."

"Me? Be secretive? Huh? What do you mean...?"

"When Alterna fell, we took a painful blow. Too painful. But we'd look pretty incompetent if your Barbara-sensei was the only survivor, now wouldn't we?"

"She's not really mine..."

"I don't mind if you want to get possessive with me. I enjoy being loved."

"Enough of the nonsense, Barbara," the other voice said. It sounded female.

Barbara shrugged.

"I know."

Haruhiro looked around the secret room. There was a round table, a lamp on top of it, four sheets of non-combustible cloth, and Barbara, as well as Haruhiro, obviously, and that was it. He was sure that was all that was in the room, and yet this other voice went on to introduce herself.

"I'm Eliza."

"She's always been shy," Barbara explained with a chuckle. "I wonder when was the last time I got a good look at her face."

"...You're a mentor in the thieves' guild?" Haruhiro asked.

"Yes," Eliza's disembodied voice responded. "I primarily act as an observer of, and contact with, the Volunteer Soldier Corps."

"The Volunteer Sol—"

Alterna fell, General Rasentra died in a duel with Jumbo the orc, the Frontier Army was destroyed, and the Volunteer Soldier Corps fled in defeat. Obviously, there had to be some survivors. But how many? And where? That remained

unclear.

That was what Haruhiro had thought.

Was he wrong?

“Where is the Volunteer Soldier Corps...?”

“The Wonder Hole,” Eliza answered. “A new race has appeared there, so I’d hardly call their situation safe, but Britney, Orion, the Wild Angels, Iron Knuckle, and the Berserkers have managed to build and defend a base there.”

Merry had given Haruhiro and the others a general rundown of the volunteer soldiers and their hunting grounds. Still, his sense of what they were like was pretty vague. He had an outline of all that knowledge in his head, but it was faint, without detail.

“...I see. So they’re at the Wonder Hole. Well, we did kinda suspect that they might’ve been. But the area was full of enemies, so we couldn’t approach it.”

“There are scouts from the Southern Expedition lurking around the Quickwind Plains,” Eliza said, introducing a term Haruhiro wasn’t familiar with.

“Southern Expedition?” he asked.

“That’s the enemy,” Barbara explained.

“The orc clans and the undead armies moved south, and joined with the goblins and kobolds. We lump all of them together as the ‘Southern Expedition.’”

The Southern Expedition had apparently split into two groups.

One had advanced through the Shadow Forest, where the elves lived, then crossed the Quickwind Plains and conquered Deadhead Watching Keep and Alterna.

The other had turned back, up the Jet River, to Riverside Iron Fortress, which they also attacked and took.

Afterwards, Alterna was given to the goblins, while Riverside Iron Fortress was granted to the kobolds.

The majority of the Southern Expedition then headed north, with one gang of

orcs remaining in Deadhead Watching Keep to monitor the situation.

“They headed north? Where? Did they just... go home?”

“The other mentors are looking into that.”

According to Barbara, there were four surviving mentors of the thieves’ guild. Barbara and Eliza, along with the brothers Fudaraku and Mosaic. The brothers were searching for the Southern Expedition, or tailing them, but they hadn’t returned yet.

“I have a hard time imagining they both got caught.”

“No news is bad news,” Eliza said.

“Isn’t the saying, ‘No news is good news’?” Barbara corrected her with a hint of exasperation in her tone. “Still, it’s true that we can’t say what’s happening there. I mean, knowing those brothers, they may have just abandoned the mission and run off.”

“You said I’m going to need to be secretive, too, right, Barbara-sensei?”

Barbara hadn’t told Anthony, who had come with Haruhiro and his group, about the Volunteer Soldier Corps. That had to mean Barbara and the others didn’t want to show their hand to the Expeditionary Force. Not yet, at least.

“You want to provide limited information to the Expeditionary Force. Am I supposed to cooperate with you on that?”

Barbara shook her head.

“Not quite.”

“Huh?”

“We want you to become a mentor in the thieves’ guild.”

“...Come again?”

“Sorry to say this when you’ve lost your memories, but we’re short of hands these days. We’ll take anyone, even an old cat.”

“Am I really cut out for that...?”

“You’ll have to do. Eliza.”

When Barbara called her name, a petite woman emerged from one of the pleats in the cloth. There must have been a seam there.

For an instant, he saw her face in profile.

It was half wrapped in a scarf, though, and her long hair almost completely covered her eyes. She wore an outfit that was a gentle, dark color, and it was hard to make out her figure.

Her gloves left the tips of her fingers exposed. It looked like she was holding something. A silvery bottle and a chalice? Eliza laid it down on the table, then turned her back towards Haruhiro, but didn't leave. She must not have wanted him to see her face.

"Our guild has always been laid back, so there's not really a formal procedure for this."

Barbara opened the bottle, and poured the contents into the chalice. Was it wine, or something similar?

"When we induct a new mentor, they share a ceremonial drink with another mentor."

Barbara passed the chalice to Eliza, who shifted her scarf, and took a sip of the liquid, still facing the other direction. She returned the chalice, and Barbara brought it to her lips, too.

"Drink the rest," Barbara said, offering the cup to Haruhiro.

She didn't ask for his opinion. *Pushy*, he thought, but Haruhiro had already taken the glass. She was his teacher, after all. She knew his personality.

"What even is this?"

"Blood," Barbara said with a smirk. "The blood of a thief."

"Whuh?!"

"You're kind of stupid, huh? That was a joke. Obviously. It's just what it looks like. Alcohol."

"Don't make fun of me..."

When he sniffed it, he did detect the scent of alcohol. But it didn't seem like

wine.

He sighed, took a drink, and choked on it.

“Whoa! This stuff is a bit strong, isn’t it...?”

“There’s not that much. Just down it all in one go.”

“I won’t get drunk, will I...?”

“If you get drunk and horny, don’t worry, I’ll take care of you.”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen. ...Probably. Not that I remember if I’ve ever gotten drunk before.”

He raised the chalice, and poured it all down his throat. His body got warm fast. Then his vision blurred.

Haruhiro returned the cup to Barbara.

“Is this stuff really just alcohol...?”

“I don’t know. The key thing is that you drink it without worrying it might be poison.”

“That never occurred to me...”

“That’s just how much you trust me, huh? Even if you don’t have your memories, your body hasn’t forgotten me.”

“There you go, saying things like that again...”

After some time, the feeling of strong alcohol flooding his body had receded considerably. Was that because of the small quantity? Or was it just not as hard as he’d thought?

“So, what I’m hearing is that our thieves’ guild doesn’t plan to rely on the Expeditionary Force.”

“You’re already sounding like a mentor, aren’t you?”

“Could you not poke fun at me over every little thing?”

“At the very least, we need to judge them first.”

“What about the Volunteer Soldier Corps?”

“We were volunteer soldiers ourselves once. If it’s a question of whether we side with the Corps or with Arabakia’s Expeditionary Force, that’s a no-brainer. If it looks like we can use the Expeditionary Force, we will.”

“Their general, Jin Mogis, wants to use us instead.”

“And that’s our reason for holding back. We don’t want to show too much of our hand. If they think we have a hundred pieces at our disposal, they’ll try to use all one hundred. But if we hide some of those pieces, make them think we only have ten, that lets us conserve the remaining ninety, saying we can’t give what we don’t have.”

Was this how Barbara-sensei had taught Haruhiro? Despite appearances, she really seemed to like looking after others.

“The Volunteer Soldiers in the Wonder Hole aren’t safe, either.” Eliza’s voice sounded somewhat like rain falling on the other side of a window. “It’s connected to a multitude of other worlds, and is highly unstable. Like I was saying earlier, a powerful new race, the grendels, appeared there recently. On top of having to fight them, there’s also a shortage of supplies. They can’t stay shut up inside that base in the Wonder Hole forever.”

“But if they come out, the area is swarming with enemies, right?” Haruhiro said, then, after thinking a moment, “*Was* swarming with enemies, when we were around there,” he corrected himself. “...I don’t know if we can call the Expeditionary Force our allies, but they aren’t blatantly our enemies. Even if they’re not our friends, we can use them.”

If the Volunteer Soldier Corps moved on its own, the Southern Expedition, which had taken Riverside Iron Fortress and Deadhead Watching Keep, would no doubt move to crush them.

But if the Expeditionary Force attacked Alterna, then that changed the situation.

“Where will the Volunteer Soldier Corps go?” Haruhiro asked.

“To Riverside Iron Fortress, probably,” Barbara answered. “If the Expeditionary Force are reliable allies, there’s the option of working together on a simultaneous attack.”

“...This is just my guess, but from what I’ve seen, if Jin Mogis learns of the existence of the Volunteer Soldier Corps, he’s not going to overlook them. He might try to bring them under his control.”

“The Volunteer Soldier Corps won’t go along with that quietly,” Eliza said with certainty.

Haruhiro sighed.

“It sounds like coordination isn’t going to be easy...”

Barbara tilted her head to the side.

“What will we do, then?”

This was a question from his teacher. As her student, he needed to rack his brains for an answer.

“...Maybe we don’t coordinate, but still launch a simultaneous attack? If the Volunteer Soldier Corps knows when the Expeditionary Force will attack, there’s still the issue of if they can prepare in time, but it shouldn’t be impossible... I guess.”

Barbara-sensei patted Haruhiro on the head, as if to praise him for his keen insight.

“Depending on the situation, we may change course, but that’s our goal for now. With that settled, how do we make it a reality? If this Jin Mogis guy is easy to handle, or unexpectedly trustworthy, that’d make this quick. I guess I really should meet him myself.”

Haruhiro had regrets.

How could he not?

There were so many things to regret about what happened.

What if he had never let Barbara-sensei meet with the general? If Haruhiro had been able to handle the man in her place, how would things have turned out? Or maybe if Barbara had been able to focus entirely on gathering information inside Alterna. That sort of arrangement should have been possible. But because Haruhiro was so unreliable, Barbara had been forced to do a bit of everything.

He didn't blame himself completely for what happened. That would be massively overestimating his own importance. But still, if things had been a little different, he might not have lost Barbara-sensei.

People died so easily.

It might be his turn next. Or one of his comrades'.

When he closed his eyes, he saw Barbara-sensei's smile.

"Listen, Old Cat."

Even now that she was gone, she taught Haruhiro things like this.

"Right now, in this moment, you've got to live so that you have no regrets. That's all there is to it."

She was dead.

But it wasn't as if she had never existed.

3. From the Winter Constellation

In Alterna, the Expeditionary Force had set up impromptu burning sites around the town where they were incinerating the goblins' corpses. The town had a crematorium, but it didn't have the facilities to burn so many bodies all at once. Besides, crematoriums were for people. Maybe it was just bad blood talking, but why should goblins be sent off in the same place? Regardless, goblins apparently turned into zombies because of the No-Life King's curse, too. There was a need to dispose of the bodies quickly.

Haruhiro and Neal entered Alterna through the north gate, and hurried to Tenboro Tower. The largest burning site was on the grounds out front, and it was extra smokey there. Not just that, it smelled terrible. It made his eyes, nose, and even his throat hurt. The soldiers working the burning site were either crying and vomiting, or shirking their duties and getting cussed out by their superiors.

The barricade that the goblins had erected in front of Tenboro Tower still hadn't been fully removed. It had simply been moved to either side so it no longer obstructed traffic. Cleaning this kind of thing up was a real hassle.

General Jin Mogis was in the great hall. This room had once been used by the Margrave as an audience chamber, and there was a stage along the back wall with an impressive chair adorning it. The red-headed general had taken a liking to sitting in that seat.

What a pompous ass. Does he think he's the king of the frontier?

But before any of those rebellious thoughts could take hold of Haruhiro today, he found himself surprised.

The general tended to have a number of his black-cloaked soldiers waiting on him at all times. They were loyal men who had served him since he led the Black Hounds, and they were the rare elites in the Expeditionary Force who could fight decently.

There were four black cloaks in addition to the general in the great hall. That was unsurprising, of course. But there was another person standing in front of the stage.

Who was it? Clearly not a member of the Expeditionary Force. They wore a white cloak. Not unadorned. It bore a crest of stars, embroidered perhaps. Seven of them in the shape of an X.

Whoever it was turned to look at Haruhiro.

“Hey,” the man said offhandedly, then, once he really saw Haruhiro, his eyes went wide.

That reaction, it meant the guy knew him. This man with an amiable, dignified face was familiar with Haruhiro.

They must have been acquaintances. So, Haruhiro knew him, too. No, he had known him. He’d forgotten, and didn’t remember.

“Uh... Hey.” Haruhiro bowed his head.

Neal gave Haruhiro a dubious look.

Who was this guy? Haruhiro had forced himself to memorize the names of people Merry had told him that he knew. Their names. A simple profile. Their relation to him, and to the rest of the party. He felt like he’d committed all those to memory the best that he could.

But he didn’t know faces. Words could only describe a person’s appearance so well.

“General,” Neal said, keeping an eye on the man as he approached, then dropped to one knee. He bowed his head. “We have returned.”

The general gave a grave nod.

It felt awkward just standing around. Haruhiro was a little behind and off to the side from Neal. He just bowed his head slightly.

The man was still regarding Haruhiro. With a smile. He was grinning. Why? He gave off an awfully friendly impression. He was obviously a good guy.

“Well?” the general asked.

Oh, great. No explanation. Nothing about who this man was. He could have introduced him at least. But Jin Mogis was not the sort of man who followed that kind of common sense. Haruhiro was constantly reminded of that.

“Sir.” Neal made no attempt to raise his face, and spoke with a slightly muffled voice. “Deadhead Watching Keep was an empty shell, like we thought.”

“Then where did the orcs go?”

“I’m sorry. That’s... unclear.”

The general drummed his fingers against the armrest of his chair. Each time his nails struck it, a loud noise echoed through the hall. *The general’s got hard nails*, Haruhiro thought, even though it really didn’t matter.

“It seems that the Volunteer Soldier Corps has information,” the general said, looking at the unidentified man.

The Volunteer Soldier Corps.

Haruhiro was sure the general had just mentioned the Volunteer Soldier Corps.

Neal looked at the man, still kneeling.

“...The Volunteer Soldier Corps, you say?”

“I am Shinohara of Orion.”

The man introduced himself.

Shinohara.

Haruhiro unconsciously touched his neck.

I know him.

Shinohara... -san, huh?

It wasn’t like his memories had come back, but he knew this much:

According to Merry, Orion was a fairly large clan, with a membership of around 30 people. Their leader was a man named Shinohara, and he knew Haruhiro well. They were more than just passing acquaintances. What was the best way to describe their relationship? It was difficult to boil it down to one

word.

Shinohara tended to look out for other people, and had taken an interest in Haruhiro and his group since back when they were still trainees. That was in part because Merry had actually been a member of Orion at one point. There was a guy called Hayashi who had been her comrade once, long ago, who was still in Orion now. Maybe that was what had gotten Shinohara to pay attention to them.

It was kind of an awkward connection.

They were a little close.

But not, like, super close.

Just how chummy had they been? If they'd met on the street, they'd probably have said hello. Or would they have stopped to chat?

Were the volunteer soldiers making their move? They'd sent Shinohara as an envoy to the Expeditionary Force. Was that what was going on here? Honestly, Haruhiro didn't know. He'd left coordinating things with the Volunteer Soldier Corps to Barbara and Eliza.

This was going to sound like an excuse, but it had never even crossed Haruhiro's mind.

That Barbara might die.

"You may already be aware, but," Shinohara began, then shrugged slightly, "the other day, we of the Volunteer Soldier Corps took Riverside Iron Fortress back from the kobolds."

Neal raised his face and looked at the general.

The general was impassive. Did he not feel anything? Was he not thinking about anything? That couldn't be right. The general didn't want other people knowing his thoughts. Wasn't that why he masked his emotions?

The general suddenly looked Haruhiro's way, causing him to break into a cold sweat. *Uh-oh*. Haruhiro hurriedly covered his mouth with his hand, and stared at Shinohara. Was that good enough? Did he look suitably surprised? He hoped so. Because he was in trouble if he didn't.

Haruhiro knew the Volunteer Soldier Corps was intact. He also knew they had planned to attack Riverside Iron Fortress at the same time as the Expeditionary Force was taking back Alterna.

But the general and Neal didn't know that he knew that. He'd deliberately not told them.

This was supposed to come as a total surprise to the Expeditionary Force. If Haruhiro didn't look shocked, he'd seem suspicious.

"However," Shinohara continued, "I believe there were around 5,000 kobolds. We were unfortunately not able to completely eradicate them."

"5,000..." Neal whispered.

"Yes," Shinohara confirmed with a smile and a nod. "We've counted a total of around 2,000 kobold bodies. The remaining 3,000 didn't flee to their old den in the Cyrene Mines, but to an old castle on Mount Grief."

In broad terms, Riverside Iron Fortress was next to the Jet River, and the Lonesome Field Outpost was located another ten kilometers east-northeast of there. The Wonder Hole was a kilometer or two northwest of the Lonesome Field Outpost, and seven or eight kilometers north of there was Mount Grief.

Haruhiro didn't know anything more about that place than its name. Shinohara had just mentioned an old castle. So there was a castle there a long time ago?

"We aren't fully confident of this yet, but our supposition is that the orcs of Deadhead Watching Keep relocated to Mount Grief, too. We have a number of thieves infiltrating the area now, so we'll find out soon enough."

"If I take you at your word," the general suddenly interrupted, "the Volunteer Soldier Corps, which is to say you people, are highly competent. You took a fortress held by 5,000 soldiers, even if they were mere savages, in the space of two days. Then, rather than celebrate your victory, you immediately pursued your routed enemy, determined exactly where they had gone, and are considering your next move against them."

Shinohara turned to the general again. Haruhiro wondered what he would say, but of course he just smiled, and rather than acting humble...

“Thank you,” he replied.

This might have been obvious, but he wasn’t just the affable guy he seemed to be. Shinohara could be brassy, too. He had to be pretty confident in his skills. He was acting bold in front of that inscrutable and unsettling general.

“If I trust what you’ve said...” The general twisted his neck slightly. “You people attacked Riverside Iron Fortress at almost the exact same time that my forces were assaulting Alterna.”

“That is what it would mean, yes,” Shinohara replied with an almost worrying lack of concern.

“That’s simply too convenient,” the general said, pausing dramatically, “for it to have been a coincidence. If you weren’t monitoring my army, you must have been very lucky.”

“It’s not just us, General.” Shinohara brought a hand to his chest, and bowed his head. “You’re lucky, too.”

The red-haired general laughed without raising his voice. It was hard to imagine any human laughing like that. Though, maybe the general wasn’t human at all. Either way, his smile was unsettling.

“I am here by order of the king. Now that the Margrave has passed away, my will is the will of His Majesty, King Idelta of Arabakia.”

“The Margrave has... I see.” Shinohara furrowed his brow. “He was a friendly man, even inviting a mere volunteer soldier like myself to Tenboro Tower to talk. That’s unfortunate. I’m sad to hear he’s passed. When did that happen?”

“When we retook Alterna, he was already gone,” the general responded instantly.

“I understand.” Shinohara crossed his arms and frowned. “You see, there was actually a volunteer soldier who held out in Alterna for a long time. When he narrowly escaped with his life, he told us that the Margrave had been taken prisoner by the goblins, and was being horrifically mistreated as they paraded him around town. I wanted to find some way to save him. It’s a shame.”

“Garlan Vedoy. Of the famous House of Vedoy.”

The general leaned his head against the back of his chair, with a far-off look in his eyes. It seemed almost as if he was reliving and reveling in the moment when he killed the Margrave, but that may have just been Haruhiro overthinking things.

“I deeply regret being unable to save him, but he is dead now.”

“Where is his body?”

When Shinohara asked that, the general didn’t hesitate for a moment.

“He’s been cremated,” he answered.

“The Margrave...” Shinohara paused, seeming to have a little difficulty asking this, “was he moving?”

“Under the No-Life King’s curse?”

“Yes.”

“I put him down myself. He was in too pitiful a state to do otherwise.”

That the general was able to state that so plainly showed just how abnormal he was.

“I understand.” The pain on Shinohara’s face, it was... well, it was incredible.

There were only a select few who knew the truth behind how the Margrave died. Only the general, Haruhiro and his party, as well as Regimental Warrior Commander Anthony Justeen. Shinohara probably only knew that the Margrave had been a prisoner in Tenboro Tower.

But had he figured out what really happened during that exchange just now?

When Alterna was retaken, the Margrave had been alive. But General Jin Mogis had murdered him. For the general, someone who was the official ruler of Alterna, and was even of higher birth, was nothing but a hindrance to him. Even now that he had some sense of what had happened, Shinohara remained calm.

“I hear that some called him the king of the frontier,” the general said, his eyes on Shinohara. “I know that was only a metaphor, of course, but I am the one who sits on his throne now.”

So bow before me, was what the general was suggesting. Why did he only hint at what he wanted, not state it outright?

The Expeditionary Force had lost around a hundred men in the battle for Alterna. That included many of the black cloaks on the team led by Dylan Stone that raided Tenboro Tower. They were the general's trusted followers, his own hand-raised troops. The Expeditionary Force still had over nine hundred men left in it, but it largely consisted of ruffians and deserters who had been scraped together.

From what Barbara and Eliza had told him, the Volunteer Soldier Corps had less than a hundred and fifty members in total. Even with those small numbers, they took Riverside Iron Fortress, which had been held by over 5,000 kobolds. The volunteer soldiers were not average soldiers. They were elite warriors, and excellent mages.

It could be that Jin Mogis was projecting false confidence. He might have been frightened of the Volunteer Soldier Corps. And even if he wasn't quite that worried, he probably didn't think he could force them to submit to him easily.

Shinohara was also confident that, despite their smaller numbers, the Volunteer Soldier Corps was equal in power to the Expeditionary Force.

If the general obstinately tried to issue an order, Shinohara might refuse. It was highly unlikely that he'd just willingly become the general's thrall.

"General," Shinohara addressed him. Jin Mogis was not the king of the frontier. At the very least, Shinohara and the volunteer soldiers had no reason to kneel before him as their monarch. "If the kobolds and orcs have gathered at Mount Grief, we cannot ignore them. The goblins in Damuro concern me, too. The volunteer soldiers won't be able to move from Riverside Iron Fortress for a while."

The general remained silent for a little while.

In terms of relative power, it was actually the general, not Shinohara, who was at a disadvantage here. Yet the red-haired general was able to dominate the room using nothing but this tense silence. There was no telling what he might try. It always felt like he might do something unthinkable at any moment.

“I understand your situation. Shinohara, was it? You should rest here at Tenboro for today. I will have food brought to you later.”

“I thank you for your kindness, General Mogis.”

Shinohara bowed to him with a smile that looked completely natural.

I dunno, this is hard to watch.

Haruhiro couldn't deny that was how he felt. It was hard to breathe, and his shoulders were stiff. No, it wasn't just his shoulders. His whole body was in rough shape.

The general waved his hand a little. That probably meant, *Get out*. Neal practically jumped to his feet and turned to leave.

“Well, I'll see you later.”

Shinohara was leaving, so Haruhiro ought to, as well — or so he thought, but it wasn't that easy.

“You stay,” the general called after him.

Come again?

You?

Who?

He hadn't been called by name. He could have tried to play dumb but, no, maybe not. The general was looking at Haruhiro. Staring at him *hard*. It was clear he meant Haruhiro.

“...Yes, sir.”

He had to stay, even if he didn't like it. And he really, really didn't. But it got worse. Once Neal and Shinohara had left the great hall, the general even chased out his black cloaks. Haruhiro really wished he hadn't.

They were all alone now.

It was beyond unpleasant.

The general wasn't saying anything for some reason. Ordering Haruhiro to stay, then getting all quiet? What was he up to? It made no sense.

Finally, giving in, Haruhiro asked, "...What is it?"

He was letting the general get the better of him, wasn't he?

Words, attitude, power — the general used every means at his disposal to control others. Haruhiro didn't like his type. But even setting aside his personal preferences, he had to be cautious when dealing with someone like this. If he didn't keep his will strong, he'd just end up going along with what they wanted him to do.

"That man, Shinohara."

The general was still looking at Haruhiro, but his eyes were unfocused. He was clearly thinking about Shinohara.

"You seemed familiar with him. Is he reliable?"

"Well..." Haruhiro mumbled. "I know him, yes. We're both volunteer soldiers, after all. And Shinohara-san is the leader of a large clan called Orion. He's kind of famous, you could say."

"Who will you side with?"

"...Come again?"

His tone sounded less demeaning, almost friendly. The general continued.

"If you choose to side with me, I will see to it that you're treated favorably. You'll likely be placed in charge of a unit within my expeditionary force."

And if he refused?

Haruhiro knew, instinctively, that he had better not ask that.

Siding with Jin Mogis. Honestly, it was out of the question. Haruhiro had lost his memory, but even despite that, if presented with the choice of the general or the Volunteer Soldier Corps, he would choose the Corps without hesitation.

Didn't the general understand that? The general had threatened Haruhiro, forced him to submit, and used him as a convenient pawn.

So the general wasn't checking what Haruhiro's intentions were. It was more likely that he was making his demand in the form of a question.

Shut up, and side with me, he was saying. If you don't, I will have to take

action. That was the suggestion here.

Basically, Haruhiro was being threatened.

He felt more than a little psychological pressure, but he wondered. Was this fear he felt really rational?

It was true that he didn't know what the general might do.

But that was all. Naturally, the general was not all-powerful, so it wasn't like he could do absolutely anything.

For example, imagine the general came at Haruhiro right now. Haruhiro didn't want to fight, but he wasn't just going to let himself get cut up. He'd fight back. Could he beat the general? He wouldn't know until he tried. But it wasn't like he didn't stand a chance. Besides, Haruhiro was a thief. He didn't need to try to trade blows with the general. If all he was trying to do was escape, he felt like he could manage that much.

Also, as the head of the Expeditionary Force, the general could mobilize his whole army if he set his mind to it, but the core of his forces was really the black cloaks, along with Neal and the other scouts. Because of the losses they had taken, there were less than fifty of them left. That didn't mean they weren't to be feared, but there was no need to overestimate the threat they posed.

He was feeling a little better now.

He had no reason to succumb to the general's threats. He just wanted to avoid giving a firm refusal now, and tearing up their relationship. Now, it would feel *really good* to do that, but there was no other reason for it.

"I'm not sure we humans can afford to be at each other's throats right now."

The general was silent. The pressure he could put on people was as incredible as ever.

But wasn't it just pressure?

The general might actually have been little more than a paper tiger. Haruhiro suspected that, but also knew that if he underestimated the general, he could still get tripped up.

“Maybe the Expeditionary Force and the Volunteer Soldier Corps ought to cooperate. I want to do whatever I can to make that possible. I think, in our situation, that’s what we have to do.”

“Is that right?”

The general smiled.

Yeah, he was scary. There was something inscrutable about him. Haruhiro didn’t know how to interpret that smile.

“Leave me.”

The general waved his hand.

Haruhiro nodded slightly, then turned away from the general.

Just before leaving the great hall, he glanced back.

The general was still smiling. There was quite some distance between them, so he couldn’t be sure, but it felt like their eyes met. Haruhiro bowed his head despite himself.

4. The Illusion of a Crossroads

Jin Mogis had assigned Haruhiro and his comrades a room in Tenboro Tower.

It looked like it had originally been used as a staging room when banquets were held. It was impressively large, but nearly empty, with no furniture other than tables and chairs.

Incidentally, this room was larger than the one given to the black cloaks, or the one given to Frontier Army Regimental Commander Anthony Justeen and his subordinates. Was that the general's way of showing how much he valued Haruhiro and his team? Even if it was, so what? It didn't make Haruhiro happy at all.

Shinohara was in the room too, waiting for Haruhiro and his party to arrive. There was a ton of stuff Haruhiro wanted to talk about, but he couldn't speak freely in Tenboro Tower. So, he figured that since Shinohara had to be interested in what things were like in Alterna, Haruhiro could take them all outside under the pretext of looking around.

As they passed by the Volunteer Soldier Corps Office and the Temple of Lumiaris, he checked to see if they were being followed. It looked like two scouts, Neal's subordinates, were monitoring them. He could have shaken them, but there was no need to do anything that would agitate the general yet.

On Shinohara's request, they dropped by the Yorozu Deposit Company.

The Yorozu Deposit Company would securely store anything you deposited with them for a fixed fee. It was a familiar business to a lot of volunteer soldiers, one they couldn't have lived without. When Alterna fell, the company must have had a massive store of gold, silver, arms, equipment, and other treasure, but it wasn't pillaged. There was no way to loot it. The solid warehouse had no windows and remained tightly sealed, with no way to get it open, not that that stopped anyone from trying. The general certainly hadn't given up. There were a number of soldiers hanging around, guarding the warehouse.

Next, Haruhiro and the rest pretended not to notice the scouts tailing them, and entered Sherry's Tavern in Celestial Alley, where they could talk in private.

"...This is pretty miserable."

Seeing the tavern in this sad state pained Shinohara. Not having any memory of the place, Haruhiro didn't think anything more than, *The goblins messed this place up pretty bad, too*, but, yeah, it was a real mess. Most of the chairs and tables had been flipped upside down or knocked over, and more than a few of them had been smashed. There were shards of plates and bottles scattered across the floor, and a sour smell permeated the building. The flies must have been drawn to the rotten food and drinks.

"This place." Merry clutched her chest, speaking to no one in particular. "We used to come here. A lot..."

The group split up and opened all the windows. They propped the door open, too.

Airing the place out helped with the stench, but the sunlight just made it easier to see how much of a disaster the tavern was.

"When Alterna was attacked, I'm sure there must have been fighting in here."

Shinohara closely examined the darkened stains that looked like blood, and the arrows sticking out of the wall.

"Most of the volunteer soldiers got away, but nearly all of the soldiers of the Frontier Army and the civilians died in Alterna. Unlike us, this was their homeland, the only place they could be. Even if they fled, they had nowhere to go."

"It's kinda hard to take in..." Kuzaku sat on the counter, hanging his head.

Setora sat on the stairs leading to the second level, and Kiichi rested next to her.

Shihoru just stood there in the middle of the tavern. She seemed lost.

Merry walked over to Shihoru, putting a reassuring hand on her back. Shihoru shuddered for a moment, but turned a tense smile her way. Then, in a voice so small it was nearly inaudible, she said, "Thank you," or something close to that.

Eventually, Shinohara started setting the tables and chairs back upright and putting them in rows. Haruhiro and Kuzaku helped.

Shinohara, Haruhiro, Kuzaku, Merry, and Shihoru sat around one table. Setora stayed on the stairs. She could see most of the tavern from there, including the windows and door. Kiichi went out the window. If their watchers were eavesdropping, Kiichi would let them know.

“It’s been a while, Haruhiro. Let me start by saying I’m glad you’re all right.”

“I just wish I remembered you, too, Shinohara-san.”

“I’ve heard some of the details.”

“...I’ll bet.”

“I heard the thieves’ guild—” Shinohara lowered his eyes. “The thieves’ guild mentor Barbara passed away.”

Haruhiro sighed.

“Yeah,” he answered. His voice was low, and awfully thin.

Shinohara laid his hands on the table.

“I knew her when she was in active duty as a volunteer soldier.”

“You... did?”

“It was only for a short time, but we were in the same party.”

“Huh?”

“We were comrades.” Shinohara looked down at his hands. “She seemed like the last person who was going to die. When she quit the volunteer soldier business and became a mentor in the thieves’ guild, I was convinced she was going to be all right. You never know, huh? I’ll bet she never saw it coming herself. But these things happen. All the time here. That’s the way of the world here in Grimgar.”

“Shinohara-san...” Merry seemed to be trying to say something. But she couldn’t find the right words, and looked down.

“Sorry,” Shinohara said with a self-effacing laugh. “This isn’t the time to get sentimental. I heard about your amnesia from Eliza. She said Merry was the

only one not affected.”

Rather than nod, Merry seemed to lower her head further.

“...Yes.”

Shinohara stroked his chin, a pensive look on his face.

“This is the first time I’ve heard of anything like this. Honestly, it’s hard to believe. Though, we’ve all experienced the same thing once.”

“Erm...” Haruhiro rubbed his cheeks as he spoke. “What happened was we woke up in the Forbidden Tower. It was dark there... We were underground. All we remembered were our names. According to Merry, before that we were in some... other world? I guess that’s what you’d call it. Some place that wasn’t Grimgar.”

“In my memories, we went to the Leslie Camp and—”

The moment Merry mentioned that name, Shinohara’s face changed color.

“The Leslie Camp? Ainrand Leslie’s camp?”

Merry looked daunted.

“...Oh. Yes. I think that’s right.”

“Through the Leslie Camp to another world, huh?” Shinohara crossed his arms. “What happened in that other world?”

“The thing is, I...” Merry bit her lip. “I don’t... um... remember the other world so well...”

Shihoru put a worried hand on Merry’s arm.

Shinohara was looking closely at Merry. What was that about? That look in his eyes. It wasn’t sharp, exactly.

No, that wasn’t it; was it doubt?

“I see.”

Was Shinohara suspicious of Merry?

At the very least, he didn’t seem wholly convinced by her story.

“Whatever it was, stuff happened in that other world, and you all woke up in

the basement of the Forbidden Tower. When you did, you had forgotten everything but your names. Except for Merry.”

Kuzaku clutched his head and groaned.

“Yeah man, thinking about it again, I dunno. It’s scary. I mean, it’s crazy, isn’t it? What the hell happened...?”

“What’s ‘crazy’ is your pitiful lack of vocabulary.”

When Setora said that, Kuzaku shouted out loud.

“Hey! I’m sensitive about that!”

Haruhiro smiled out of exasperation.

“So, it did bother you...”

“Just a little, though.”

Kuzaku held up his hand with his index finger and thumb so close together you couldn’t tell if they were touching or not.

“Seriously, only a little.”

“It ought to bother you more.”

“Setora-san, listen, could you not sit off in the corner, sniping at me?”

“What? Do you want me to stay close to you?”

“I dunno that I want you close, but I know I don’t want you gone, so I guess, yeah, I want you to stay reasonably close...?”

“I refuse.”

“What, you’re gonna refuse?”

Kuzaku slumped his shoulders.

“...What, you’re gonna refuse?”

“Why’d you have to say it twice...?” Haruhiro asked in exasperation.

Kuzaku looked at Haruhiro with upturned eyes.

“What is this I’m feeling now? It kinda hurts, you know...?”

“Jeez, you’re not an abandoned puppy...”

“Ohh, I see. That’s what this is, huh? This is how a dog feels when it’s abandoned by its master? Something like that, huh? You could be right...”

“Since when were you my pet?”

When Setora said that with clear disgust, Kuzaku’s eyes bugged out.

“Why’re you so against it...?”

“Do you not understand?”

“Huh? No, not at all. Why?”

“Whatever’s wrong with your head is beyond help...”

“...It’s fine. Really. I’ll get Merry-san to heal me.”

“I don’t think I can fix you.” Merry looked pretty displeased, too.

“Seriously?” Kuzaku was visibly shocked. “...Not even you can fix me? ...Seriously? I’ve got it bad...”

“Hey, now...”

For a moment, Haruhiro considered consoling him, but it felt wrong.

“Yeah, I guess you do, huh?”

“So that’s the kind of kid you were...”

Even if it was Shinohara, Haruhiro didn’t know how he felt about him treating Kuzaku like a kid. Well, he couldn’t blame him.

In an attempt to get things back on track, Haruhiro turned to Shinohara.

“If I say the name Hiyomu, do you know who I’m talking about?”

“Yes,” Shinohara answered, but he didn’t nod. “I know.”

Something felt off.

What was it? Haruhiro wasn’t entirely sure.

“...Hiyomu, or her master, did something to us, and it seems like that’s what made us lose our memories.”

Shinohara fell silent. Had something occurred to him? Or was he confused? It was hard to say which. It was an odd moment.

Haruhiro glanced at Merry. Merry seemed to think it was weird, too.

“Regardless.” Shinohara looked around at the group. “We should think of that matter as separate from the current problem. I can’t imagine the master of the Forbidden Tower would have invited the Southern Expedition in.”

“Yeah... I guess so...”

Haruhiro nearly cocked his head to the side. Something felt off. Again. But this time he felt like he’d caught a glimpse of what it was that bothered him.

Shinohara couldn’t imagine that the master of the Forbidden Tower had invited the Southern Expedition, which was to say the orcs, goblins, and kobolds.

That was what he had just said. It might well have been true. But wasn’t there something strange about it?

Well, he knew what that something was.

Who exactly was the master of the Forbidden Tower?

Haruhiro could make inferences.

Haruhiro and the others had woken up in the basement of the tower. Hiyomu had been mixed in with a group that was all volunteer soldiers, including Haruhiro. She pretended to have lost her memories, like everyone else. It was an act. Hiyomu had apparently been planning something nefarious on the orders of her master.

The master of the Forbidden Tower was probably Hiyomu’s master. That was a possible interpretation. It made sense.

However, Haruhiro had never once thought that Hiyomu’s master was the master of the Forbidden Tower before.

Hiyomu was deeply involved with the tower. There was no questioning that. But still, did the equation of “her master” = “the master of the tower” work?

The Forbidden Tower was supposed to be this mysterious building that volunteer soldiers weren’t able to enter.

Was that wrong?

Did Shinohara not think that? The Forbidden Tower had a master. Did he know that someone was living there? Or was it just a rumor?

Still, at the very least, Merry hadn't said anything like that.

"By the way," Shinohara suddenly changed the subject, "did you hear that Yume-san and Ranta-kun are with the Volunteer Soldier Corps?"

"Yume...!" Merry covered her mouth with both hands. Her eyes seemed to be trying to push the limits of how wide they could open, and she looked like she might burst into tears any second.

Yume.

Ranta.

For Haruhiro, those were just names. He didn't remember them, after all. But when he saw Merry's reaction, he felt emotion welling up inside him.

"...They were with you guys, huh? I see. Both of them, too. I dunno... We split up with Ranta after we had a fight, right? Okay, maybe 'had a fight' isn't the right way to put it. I don't really know..."

Haruhiro tried to recall how Merry'd told him things had happened, but it wasn't going very well.

"Ohh?!" Kuzaku started trembling, and wrapped his arms around himself. "I'm getting the shakes. What is this? Do I have some weird disease? Yeah, no. I don't, right...?"

Shihoru was tearing up. She seemed bewildered by that.

"Having no memories of them, I have nothing in particular to say." Setora was the same as ever. "I would rather have met them in person than simply be told they are well. That would have been quicker, and more certain. Couldn't you have brought the two of them with you?"

"Um, did you have to say it like that to our senior, Setora-san...?" Kuzaku quietly chided her. Shinohara smiled.

"You don't have to worry about it. The clan has a command structure, so it's inevitable that there's a hierarchy, but I'm a volunteer soldier, the same as all of you. We're equals."

Setora had a faint smile on her face.

“I’m not even a volunteer soldier, so there’s even less need for me to mince words with you. I feel we’ll get hurt if we take your words at face value. I’m probably the suspicious type. I approach things without any preconceptions, but that only makes everyone seem dubious.”

Haruhiro felt like he’d had cold water poured on him.

Setora wasn’t wrong. Actually, Setora was rarely wrong about anything.

Yume and Ranta were alive, and working with the Volunteer Soldier Corps. That was good news. If it was true. Right now, the only one saying that was Shinohara.

“I did consider bringing them with me, of course.”

Shinohara didn’t look particularly offended. He was smiling, the same as before.

“But there’s the issue of your memories. I didn’t want to complicate an already complex situation. Taking everything into consideration, we talked it over within the Volunteer Soldier Corps, and this was what we decided to do. Yume-san and Ranta-kun both accepted it.”

Setora simply shrugged, not saying any more.

Shinohara. The master of Orion. The guy seemed impeccable.

Unlike Setora, Haruhiro wasn’t particularly suspicious of him — okay, maybe that wasn’t true.

Merry seemed to trust him implicitly, but Haruhiro didn’t remember Shinohara, and Setora had never even met him. He seemed trustworthy. But even if he gave that impression, did that mean they could actually trust him?

Haruhiro might have just been trying to read too much into things. He was being cautious. That was for sure. Setora was probably doing the same.

He’d gone with the flow up to this point, because he’d had no other choice but to follow the path laid out in front of him.

Now he had come to a fork in the road. He had to decide which choice would

be the best for him and his party.

Haruhiro looked around to each of his comrades.

“Everyone, if you’ve got any opinions, I want to hear them.”

Kuzaku groaned and shook his head.

“I don’t think I do.”

“I haven’t even said what I’m talking about yet...”

“Would someone please silence this nincompoop?” Setora said coldly.

Shihoru let out a weak laugh.

“Setora-san.” Kuzaku’s expression was suddenly serious, which made Setora falter a little.

“...Wh-What?”

“You called me a nincompoop... Don’t you think that sounds kind of cute?”

“Is that a question you should ask with a serious look on your face?”

“Nah, I just thought it.”

“And you have to say every single thing that passes through your head?”

“You know, maybe it does sound a little cute. Nincompoop...” Merry mumbled.

Haruhiro cleared his throat. Everyone turned to look at him.

“Erm. Listen, uh... What I’m trying to say is, we don’t have to let the Expeditionary Force... that is to say General Jin Mogis, boss us around forever. I think we can act as members of the Volunteer Soldier Corps.”

Everyone looked Haruhiro in the eye and nodded. So far, there were no objections. That seemed good enough.

“It’s just... the question of whether we should leave the Expeditionary Force now or not is another matter. The general sees us as his pawns. I doubt he trusts us, but he’s trying to win us to his side. We need to think about what he might do if we try to say, ‘Okay, we’re going back to the Volunteer Soldier Corps now.’”

“That’s exactly it.”

Shinohara explained the Volunteer Soldier Corps’ current situation.

Haruhiro had been told this already, but the Volunteer Soldier Corps was suffering from a shortage of supplies. In fact, occupying Riverside Iron Fortress had done nothing to ameliorate that.

The kobolds had some rather unique eating habits, so there hadn’t been much at the fortress that was fit for human consumption. While they weren’t starving yet, if they didn’t secure supplies soon, or have some given to them, the Volunteer Soldier Corps was going to face a food crisis in the not-so-distant future.

On top of that, Mount Grief, where they believed their enemies were gathering, was fifteen kilometers north of Riverside Iron Fortress. It was forty kilometers as the crow flew from Alterna, so Riverside Iron Fortress was much closer.

The Volunteer Soldier Corps had beaten 5,000 kobolds to take the fortress. However, taking it and holding it were two separate issues. The defender was usually supposed to have the overwhelming advantage, but that actually depended on the conditions.

The Volunteer Soldier Corps had overcome the difference in numbers with their powerful magic, and exceptional individual fighting ability.

But if they tried to defend the fortress with somewhere over a hundred people, were they going to have enough to cover all of the walls? If there was a single break anywhere, the fortress’s entire defense could collapse in an instant.

On top of that, if the orcs from Deadhead Watching Keep had gone to Mount Grief like they thought, the threat was only growing. The orcs were a far more dangerous race than the kobolds, after all.

If the enemies at Mount Grief came to attack Riverside Iron Fortress, the Volunteer Soldier Corps was going to have a pretty hard time. If they couldn’t hold the fort, they’d have no choice but to flee.

Where would they run?

Not the Wonder Hole. The Corps had been struggling at their base there. They had retaken Riverside Iron Fortress in order to open a route to their survival.

There was another possibility.

Alterna.

Assuming the Expeditionary Force would welcome them.

“For my part,” Shinohara said in a gentle, but firm tone, “I would like you to stay with the Expeditionary Force, the same as you have up until now. What you can take from that is, I’m asking you to be our spies. Obviously, that carries a certain degree of risk. If you find yourselves in danger, please, pull out immediately. If it comes to that, we’ll protect you.”

“How exactly?” Setora laughed. “You people are away from Alterna, where it’s safe. I can’t see how you’re going to help us when we need it.”

“We have no intention to oppose the Expeditionary Force. If we can cooperate, that would be best. However, though I called you spies, I don’t expect to have you disrupt the Expeditionary Force from within, or anything like that.”

“What you want is... information, right?”

When Shihoru hesitantly asked that, Shinohara answered immediately.

“That’s correct. Particularly on Jin Mogis’s objectives, and what he intends to do from this point on, in as much detail as you can manage. This is *not* so that we can fight the Expeditionary Force. If we can get along with them smoothly, that’s the best outcome. I want you to help us with that.”

It didn’t sound like there was any reason to refuse.

Though Haruhiro didn’t have his comrades’ agreement yet, he and his party would likely accept Shinohara’s request. They weren’t going to turn him down.

It’s not bad. I mean, I think it’s the only option.

But something doesn’t feel right.

Why?

5. Between the Front, and the Back, and the Shadows, and the Sky

The sun was about to rise. He hated the way morning came every day. There were plenty of other things he hated, too. More than he could ever count.

The grassy hill was littered with white stones. Under the dim predawn sky, they seemed to glow faintly, almost like some sort of mushrooms.

He'd hated this scene ever since the first time he witnessed it. It was creepy. Sickening. He just couldn't stand it.

He came to a stop in front of one white stone. It bore a crescent moon emblem and the name of the deceased.

As he looked down at it, a smile crossed his face.

It was not voluntary. Rarely did he want to smile. Yet, still, he was able to. You could almost call it a talent of his.

He kicked the ground with his heel.

Again and again.

He sighed.

He looked up at the sky, scattered with clouds.

At first glance, they seemed still. But they were moving. They never stopped. Their shapes changed, too.

He was smiling, the same as ever.

"This is real," he mumbled, then lowered his eyes to the white stone once more.

He read the name.

Spoke it out loud.

Over and over.

His smile never broke.

He put his right foot on the stone. Braced his left leg. Pressed hard against the marker. The gravestone was large enough you could wrap your arms around it. It was just a big rock, but it didn't budge in the slightest.

He moved his right foot.

There was a footprint on the tombstone.

He could look at it with a smile. Not that it was funny. He could smile regardless. Even if he wasn't happy, even if he wasn't enjoying himself, he could smile anytime, anywhere.

"Yeah, I don't really feel anything."

He cocked his head to the side slightly.

He felt nothing.

Was that truly the right way to put it?

"This isn't real."

He nodded, then started walking.

He strolled along leisurely, checking the names on each of the gravestones.

"Ahh, so this is where you were."

He came to a stop.

He pronounced the name on the grave marker as clearly as he could.

He crouched, touching the stone with his hand.

He traced the name carved into it with his fingertip.

He was smiling.

"Hey, what do you think? The sky feels so real, but my feelings are removed from reality, you know? Have things gradually become less real? Or was it like this all along? I don't remember anymore. What was it like, I wonder?"

He wasn't expecting an answer.

Dead men do not speak. They do not feel. Do not think. Besides, it was

dubious whether the owner of the name carved into the tombstone had ever existed at all.

If he were to smash this grave until nothing was left, to erase it completely, the last trace of the dead would be lost.

Some people might say that their memory would remain. However, that “memory” was frail and transient. If something major happened, people would soon forget it. There was no more to it than that.

Obviously, they might recall it again at any time, by chance. But by that point, some memories would be different from what they were before.

Memories were mutable, ever-changing things. They were altered by one’s mood, self-centered interpretation, and what happened around them, being recomposed all the time.

They were like bubbles.

Beautiful bubbles, with a rainbow sheen.

They burst when touched, so it was best not to.

Someone was approaching. He’d long since noticed them. He could have drawn his sword, Beheader. It was a smallish longsword at first glance, but he could bury it in stone with all his might and the blade wouldn’t break. It was a genuine relic. But he didn’t even put a hand on the hilt.

Someone was coming. But who?

They walked with creeping steps, but they hadn’t managed to fully erase their presence. Because of that, he had some idea who it was. That’s why he let her be. She was standing behind him.

“Boo!” she cried, hugging him from behind.

He had the same smile as before on his face, looking at the gravestone, not her.

“...Hmph. Booooring. You’re not surprised at allll.”

“If you want to surprise me, you’ll need to come up with more of a twist.”

“Like thiiiiis?”

There was a loud smacking sound as she kissed him on the cheek.

He wasn't flustered. He didn't really feel anything from it.

"That didn't surprise me, but when you put your weight on me like that, it's a nuisance. Get off, Hiyo."

"Whuh?! You're calling me heavyyyy? How can you say that to a young maiden?"

"I'll kill you," he told her plainly. He probably wouldn't actually do it, but he wouldn't have minded.

"...Scaaaaryyyy. Ooookay then!" Hiyo reluctantly got off him.

He stood up, and started turning to face Hiyo. Midway, another figure entered his vision. Now *that* caught him by surprise.

He had more or less anticipated that Hiyo would show herself. He'd made a point of stopping by this hill rather than returning straight to Riverside Iron Fortress. Hiyo would come. He'd predicted that. In fact, he'd done it to offer her an invitation.

The tall, thin man was standing five or six meters away from Hiyo and him.

He wore a towering, wide-brimmed hat, making him look even taller than he actually was. But even accounting for that, the man might have been close to two meters tall.

Despite his height, his shoulders were oddly slim, with an extreme slope to them. The cloak he wore was dark, with a hue that was hard to place as red, or blue, or green. Though he carried a white staff, it didn't seem as if he required a walking stick.

Because he wore his hat low over his eyes, and also had a long, curly beard, it was hard to make out the shape of his face. He was probably human. But he might have been some other race instead. Maybe he wasn't a living being at all.

The man did not move much. It was unclear if he was even breathing. From here, there was no evidence of any life functions.

"Oh, my."

He gave the man a slight bow. He never took his eyes off him as he did.

“Sir Unchain. I hadn’t expected you to come out of the Forbidden Tower yourself.”

Sir Unchain’s beard shook, as if trembling. Had he let out a silent laugh?

“Hiyo was a bit surprised too, you know?” Hiyo said with a shrug. “Master said he wanted to talk with you himself, Shinocchi.”

“It’s an honor.” He looked at Hiyo. “But don’t call me that silly name. Not that it upsets me, but it does make me want to shut you up in the fastest way possible.”

“Th-There’s no need to get so aaaangry, is theeere? We’re pals, aren’t we, Shinocchi? Ohh! Sowwie! That was a joke. Just a little friendly kidding around! Shi-Shinohara! Shinohara-san, Shinohara-sama! Are we good now? Geez, you just can’t take a joke...!”

“Because your jokes aren’t even worth cracking a smile over.”

“No, no, Shinocchi, you’re smiling right now, you know...? Oof! Time out! That one was an accidental mistake! Shi-no-ha-ra!”

“Hiyo.” Sir Unchain spoke in a low, husky voice.

“Yesh?!”

Hiyo seemed ready to jump up into the air as she turned to face Sir Unchain, her back ramrod straight.

Sir Unchain swung his right hand, the one he did not hold the staff with, from left to right just once.

“Begone.”

“Yessir!” Hiyo made a gesture that looked like a salute, then turned on her heel and dashed away. For a while, she headed towards Alterna, then made a panicked change of course and headed up the hill.

“I can’t understand why you use her,” Shinohara accidentally let his true feelings slip.

“Heh...” Sir Unchain let out an indistinct utterance.

He shifted his staff up and down slightly. That staff made of animal, or perhaps human, bone was almost certainly a relic.

“Is that not what people are like, in the end?”

Shinohara stared at Sir Unchain.

To think that this man — this monster that Shinohara wasn’t even certain breathed — could create a human.

“Ainrand Leslie.”

When Shinohara spoke his name once more, the monster slowly raised his chin. What looked like eyes peered out from beneath the brim of his hat.

Were those eyes? There was no white, nor were there pupils. Just holes. Shinohara looked again. Those weren’t holes. They weren’t eyeballs. Were there some black objects stuck in his eye sockets? They couldn’t be mere glass eyes. Those had to be relics.

“Shinohara.”

“...Yes. What is it?”

“You are one of a select few — a valued comrade.”

Shinohara was not so credulous that he could take the monster’s words at face value. In all the time since he awoke here in Grimgar, he never had been.

“Thank you,” Shinohara smiled.

He was no comrade. He was a tool. A hound, at best.

However, the monster had deemed Shinohara useful. That much was certain.

“I view you as my savior. If I hadn’t met you, I would be no different than a roaming ghost with no goal. But now I have purpose. Thanks to you.”

“If only there were more like you.”

“You tried to bring them in, and failed. Did Hiyo mess up?”

“Something went wrong, or perhaps... some unknown element has brought on an unexpected situation.”

“An unknown element,” Shinohara repeated the words.

He's talking about her, huh?

"You erased their memories with a relic. Like you've always done to us."

"That is correct."

"It's more convenient not to know, not to remember. Or perhaps I should say there are a lot of inconveniences that come with being able to remember."

"Yes. However..."

"She did not forget."

Merry.

He couldn't imagine the woman was anything special.

She lost a comrade. That trauma had manifested as a personality disorder. As a priest, she became difficult to use. That changed for the better when she met a group of simple youths.

It was an all too common story.

There had to be a number of other volunteer soldiers who shared a similar experience.

"...Why just her?"

"That is completely unclear," the monster said.

Was the wind starting to pick up?

No, that wasn't it.

That sound was the monster's breathing, or perhaps a groan.

"We must watch her."

"You're asking me to?"

"Who else could I ask?"

"Got it. I'll pay attention to her."

"The commander of the Expeditionary Force, or whatever they call it..."

"I met him. Jin Mogis. It sounds like he wants to be king of the frontier."

"To be king."

“He’s more than sly. The man never misses a trick. That’s for certain. He’s audacious, and he’s cold.”

“Should he be removed?”

“I wonder. He’s fundamentally lacking something.”

“What is that?”

“Power.”

“He is not deserving of our fear, then?”

“I’m sure there are uses for him.”

“How would you use him?”

“Depending on how things develop, even if it becomes difficult to control the Volunteer Soldier Corps, he can be used as a check on them.”

“The Volunteer Soldier Corps.”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t expect they would be too much for you to handle.”

“Soma, Akira, and Rock have yet to return from the depths of the Wonder Hole. But even without them, the Corps managed to take Riverside Iron Fortress with ease.”

“If Soma returns...”

“I can’t control him. If he doesn’t come back, I won’t have to worry about it, but it’s dangerous to be too optimistic. He’ll return eventually. If Soma and Akira work together, they may produce a result you don’t want.”

“Jin Mogis. We should use him... you think?”

“I doubt you need my advice, but it’s an option.”

“You are one of us. Your opinion is always worth hearing.”

“You could manipulate the Expeditionary Force. Just like the late Margrave.”

The monster nodded.

He turned his back to Shinohara and walked away. His legs were like sticks,

without a shred of flexibility in how they moved as he walked. Yet his head and shoulders barely moved up and down. There wasn't even the sound of his clothes rustling with each step. If the monster hadn't cast a shadow, you would have had to conclude he was some sort of ghost.

Shinohara suddenly felt compelled to look down at his own feet.

He had a shadow, like he should.

"I... Do I want to go back? Really...?"

6. The Blue Ring

With the goblin corpses incinerated, the organization of the soldiers of the Expeditionary Force noticeably deteriorated.

Half of them were posted to guard the walls or provide security at Tenboro Tower, while the remainder cleared rubble or repaired buildings to use as barracks or warehouses. It was only twenty, maybe thirty percent of all the soldiers, at best, that took the work seriously. The rest were just shirking as much work as they could, often squatting, sitting, or taking unauthorized breaks.

There was no shortage of men who abandoned their posts. They didn't want to work, but even if they wanted to desert, they couldn't leave Alterna. The best they could do was take a nap in some random building, chat among themselves, and gamble. If they went looking, there was plenty of booze to be found. More than a few were drinking in the middle of the day.

Haruhiro and his group were treated as a special unit under the direct command of General Jin Mogis. But had they received any special orders from him? Not really. He felt like he would get out of shape if they sat around in their room in Tenboro Tower all the time, so he spent most of the day wandering around Alterna.

Is it okay for me to be doing this? he wondered.

Not that he had anything else to do.

He had no orders, but there were limitations placed on what he could do. Neal and the scouts surreptitiously, and sometimes openly, kept a stubborn eye on Haruhiro and the others. If he were to try to get out of Alterna, he would be discovered immediately.

Alterna was a small town. After three days, there wasn't a road he hadn't been down. Even Haruhiro, who had no memories, felt like a local in no time.

The area around the volunteer soldier lodging house felt especially familiar, or

maybe even comforting to him. Even though he didn't have the ability to look at places and reminisce about how this happened here, or that happened there, when he was wandering idly he always seemed to end up at the lodging house. Merry said Haruhiro and the others had lived there for a long time, so maybe his body had grown accustomed to it.

Though the inside of the volunteer soldier lodging house was dusty, it was largely intact. Would it be possible for them to stay here rather than the room in Tenboro Tower?

Maybe I'll ask the general. No, if I go to him asking for a favor, he might take advantage of me.

As Haruhiro was thinking about it, Neal came over, and told him the general was calling for him. He wanted him to come to dinner, but to come alone.

Though Haruhiro would really have preferred not to, he had no choice. He headed to the dining hall in Tenboro Tower.

"Hello, hello, helloooo."

When he entered the dining hall, the woman who had already arrived before him waved and greeted Haruhiro.

It looked like the general wasn't there yet. The only occupants of this large dining hall which the Margrave would once have used were Haruhiro, the woman in question, and Frontier Army Regimental Commander Anthony Justeen.

Anthony nodded to Haruhiro, a look of bewilderment on his face. *Who's the woman? Do you know her?* it seemed to say.

Well, yes, he did know her. But it was still hard to say, *Yes, we're acquainted*, or anything else along those lines.

"What... are you doing here...?"

"His Excellency the future king of the frontier called. Nyeheh!"

No, not 'Nyeheh!' I'm gonna punch you. That's what Haruhiro would have said, if he were a little more prone to violence. That, or slug her, then say it.

Haruhiro sat down next to Anthony, then thought, *Aw, crap.* Hiyomu was

directly across from him.

“How’ve you beeeen?”

Hiyomu was resting both her elbows on the table, which was large enough for twenty people to eat at, her smug, smirking face resting on top of her interlocked fingers. Haruhiro really hated that woman. He wasn’t the kind of guy who went around thinking of women as “that woman,” but he felt no hesitation in thinking of Hiyomu that way.



“You look like you’ve been doing fine.”

Yeah, I seriously loathe her. To an insane degree.

Once he realized that, he was able to calm himself down. It was ridiculous to let himself get emotional about dealing with this woman. Was she even worth it? No. It was a waste of sentiment.

“Just peeeeachy, okay? Hiyomu’s aaaalways peachy, peachy keen! A bundle of maidenly energy, okaaaay? Energy! Courage! Motivation! And seriousness to boot! Yayyyy!”

“...”

“What, what, what? Haruhiro-kuuun? Haruharu? Haruhirohiroharu?”

“...”

“You’re not giving much of a reaction, are you? Please respond.”

“...”

“The heeeell? Don’t just sit there with no expression. That pisses Hiyomu off more than anything, you knooooow?”

“...”

“Heyyyy. I said, heyyyy. Speak up, you absolute dumbass.”

“...”

“Ohhh. I see how it is. Are you *sure* you want to take that attitude? Are you *really* sure? Don’t blame me if you end up regretting it, okay? You reeeeeeally should bow to Hiyomu, though. Are you a complete and utter dipshit who can’t see what’s coming, huhhhh? I bet your feet stink, too, yeaaaah?”

Well, she clearly wasn’t going to hold back on the insults. Though, it didn’t make him mad so much as exasperated.

What was the woman doing here? He was curious about that, of course. But he didn’t really need to hear that from the horse’s mouth. There was no point in talking to her. He couldn’t imagine the woman telling him the truth. She clearly wasn’t thinking of anything but toying with him, deceiving him, and leading him astray. He wouldn’t play along.

Eventually, General Jin Mogis arrived with two of the black cloaks and Neal in tow.

Hiyomu hopped to her feet, and Anthony followed suit. For a moment, Haruhiro thought, *Maybe I should stay sitting*. But, well, acting stubborn here wasn't going to serve much purpose. He decided to stand.

The general sat down at the head of the table, in what must have been the Margrave's seat. The black cloaks and Neal did not sit, instead standing behind the general.

"You may sit," the general said, and Hiyomu and Anthony were seated. Haruhiro sat down in his chair, too. But why did he need permission just to sit down?

The general looked at them in silence. Was this his usual way of controlling the mood? He used silence as a tool to dominate the room. Was that something the general had come by naturally? Or was it a technique he was employing deliberately?

Haruhiro grew thirsty as the time passed, and he was starting to feel restless. Eventually, none of them would be able to maintain their composure. That had to be what the general was waiting for.

The general placed his hands on the dining table, his right hand over his left.

The ring on his finger seized Haruhiro's attention.

Had the general been wearing a ring like that before? Hmm. Haruhiro didn't think so, but he couldn't be sure. He'd never noticed it before now, at least.

It wasn't an especially large ring. But despite that, it really drew the eye. The band and head must have been gold, or some alloy that contained it. But before that, the first thing he noticed was the blue stone mounted on the head.

What kind of jewel was it? It was a fairly light blue, but it didn't give the impression of being pale. In fact, it was a vivid, imposing blue.

The stone itself was round. He wasn't sure if it was the cut or the lighting, but he could see petal-like shapes floating inside it. There were probably three of them. Or it could have been three leaves.

“Our Expeditionary Force must grow ever more united,” the general said, turning his rusty eyes toward Anthony. “Isn’t that right, Anthony Justeen?”

Anthony lowered his chin to nod. “...Yes, sir,” he responded.

“I...” The general used the index finger of his ring-bearing left hand to tap the back of his other two, three times, as if scratching it. “Have no intent of returning south of the Tenryu Mountains, to what they call the mainland of the Kingdom of Arabakia. We will become natives of the frontier, and build a paradise in this land. To accomplish that, it goes without saying that a powerful leader, and wise and loyal men who support him, will be essential. Do you have any objection to that, Haruhiro?”

“...Me?” Haruhiro murmured despite himself.

“Yes, you,” the general pressed him without delay. “If you believe my ideas are incorrect, you may say so.”

“No...” Haruhiro nearly lowered his eyes, but managed to stop himself somehow. But it was really tough answering with the general’s gaze on him. “...I don’t think your words are wrong.”

“Then you are in agreement?”

“I... guess I am. If we’re just talking in general, sure.”

“I intend to dissolve the Expeditionary Force entrusted to me by King Idelta of Arabakia, and reorganize it as a new Frontier Army. The reborn Frontier Army will throw off the yoke of the Kingdom of Arabakia, and act as an independent force.”

The general used weighty words without hesitation. If Haruhiro interrupted him, he would likely be crushed.

“The frontier was never Arabakia’s to begin with. The frontier belongs to us. When I say ‘us,’ I mean not just us humans, but all of the races. If we can just find common cause, I believe that we should join hands with any race, and any faction. In order for our newborn Frontier Army to survive in this land, put down firm roots, establish a domain, and attain independence as a nation, we must not hesitate to take the options that are available to us. We must probe every possibility. Even if it defies common sense, if there is some hope of

realizing it, there is nothing we should not attempt. Is it not a truly strong leader who can make decisions like that?”

I, myself, am like that. That was probably what the general wanted to say. Actually, he pretty much had. He would become a leader, basically a king, and lead not the Kingdom of Arabakia’s Expeditionary Force, but a new Frontier Army.

Hiyomu had said something to the effect of the general having called her here. When she did, if Haruhiro recalled, she’d called the general the future king of the frontier.

Had Hiyomu been connected to the general all this time? Or had she made contact in the last few days, and rapidly gained his confidence? Whatever the case, Hiyomu had been told about the general’s intentions in advance for sure.

Jin Mogis might have decided to join hands with Hiyomu, or rather her boss, the master of the Forbidden Tower.

“E-Excuse me...” Haruhiro opened his mouth, then regretted it.

Hiyomu isn’t trustworthy. I’d like you to reconsider.

If the general were his friend, he’d have offered that advice. If he respected the general and was loyal to him, he ought to warn him. But neither of those things were true. Besides, even if Haruhiro told him something with complete sincerity, he didn’t think the general would accept it.

“What?” the General asked with a blank expression.

Haruhiro looked down and shook his head.

“...It’s nothing.”

Hiyomu wore a knowing smirk. Damn her. He felt the blood rushing to his head, but he didn’t let that get the better of him. This was no time to snap.

Haruhiro and his party belonged to Jin Mogis’s faction for now. He might not have liked it, but that was how things were. He had to acknowledge it.

Hiyomu, or rather the master of the Forbidden Tower, had stolen their memories. There was no way they were on his side. They had to be enemies.

However, it looked like those enemies had made a deal with the general.

But we're volunteer soldiers. That's what he wanted to think, but he didn't identify with that job enough for him to use it as a source of emotional support. Honestly, he didn't care that much for it. He had accepted Shinohara's request to play the role of a spy. It wasn't that he didn't understand why he'd had to, but he didn't like the way that felt, either.

This was turning into a serious hassle, wasn't it?

"If you have something to say, you may speak freely." The general smiled at Haruhiro. "I am counting on you people. There is something I need you to do, too."

If he could have, Haruhiro would have rolled his eyes into the back of his head and passed out right there. No joke. Haruhiro seriously wanted to run away. What was it that the general needed him to do? It was absolutely going to be a pain. And the general meant to have them do it, like it or not, didn't he?

"The meal."

When the general raised his right hand, the black cloaks left the dining hall. They must have gone to get the serving staff.

After retaking Alterna, the general had selected about twenty people from the logistics unit and reassigned them to Tenboro Tower. They weren't soldiers anymore. They cooked, cleaned, and did laundry. The general probably wanted to make Tenboro Tower his palace. Though, considering how short-handed they were, the outlook for that was not exactly positive.

"I've heard that Alterna was trading with the free city of Vele."

When the general turned to her, Hiyomu nodded.

"Yep, yep. And Vele trades with the Red Continent, too. *Obviously* they have tasty, tasty seafood."

"There are many people, men and women alike, living there."

"You might be better off saying 'of all races' there, but weeeeell... Vele isn't just a city, it's more of a city-state, you coooould say?"

The general started using the fingers of his right hand to repeatedly fiddle

with his ring.

Eventually, the cooking staff came wearing white aprons and white head-coverings. They served lightly flavored meat and vegetables, bread, and some sort of dumplings. Simple dishes that made the most of their ingredients. The only seasonings they had were salt and a small quantity of spices, so perhaps it was worth noting that the natural flavor of the ingredients was all that they could rely on.

The servers brought a bottle of alcohol, and poured it into the glasses in front of Haruhiro and the others. When they did, they always managed to spill a little on the table, but the general showed no sign of caring.

“First come the goblins of Damuro,” the general said, taking his glass in hand and raising it.

Hiyomu and Anthony reached for their glasses, too. Haruhiro couldn't.

The goblins of Damuro... Wait, what...?

“What's wrong?” The general cocked his head to the side. He was looking at Haruhiro.

“Oh... No, it's nothing.”

Haruhiro hurriedly picked up his glass.

Nothing.

Nothing?

No, this isn't nothing, is it?

“...The goblins?” he asked.

“I believe...” The general narrowed his eyes. “We can form an alliance with the goblins of Damuro. At the very least, there is room for it to happen.”

“Huh?!” Anthony's eyes went wide. “Hold on... A-An alliance?! An alliance with *goblins*?!”

“That is correct,” the general replied matter-of-factly. “We will need to send an envoy. First, we must inform the king of the goblins in the New City of Damuro, Gwagajin, I believe his name was, of our intentions.”

Haruhiro set his glass down on the table.

Hiyomu's shoulders shook as she chuckled.

She's the worst.

"What is it?" the general addressed Haruhiro again.

No, there's no two ways about it. The thing he needs us to do. It had to be this, of all things?

When Haruhiro remained silent, the general raised his glass.

"To our beloved frontier."

He tilted back his glass without directly saying "cheers." Hiyomu did likewise. Anthony was still dumbfounded, so he took one sip before returning his glass to the table.

"Now, you know what they say about an empty stomach."

Even at the general's urging, Haruhiro couldn't bring himself to touch the food. He had no appetite. He wanted to leave his seat at once, but would that be a bad idea after all? It wasn't only a problem for him. His comrades were here, too. If Haruhiro screwed up, he might drag them down with him. He had to avoid that no matter what.

My head's a mess.

What should he do? He didn't know. Not immediately.

Haruhiro thought the general might give specific orders during the meal, but he didn't say anything in particular. That was a little disappointing, but Haruhiro barely touched the food he was served. He sat in his chair, biding his time until the general finished devouring everything in front of him and dismissed them. That was all he could do.

When he left the dining hall and returned to his room, Kuzaku practically sprang on him, a look of alarm on his face.

"Haruhiro!"

"Wh-What? What happened?"

"It's Shihoru-san!"

“Huh?!”

He looked around the room, and saw only Kuzaku, Merry, Setora, and Kiichi.

Merry was white as a sheet. Kiichi was uncharacteristically at Merry’s side, not Setora’s, so was he trying to cheer her up? Setora had her arms crossed and her brow furrowed.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What do we do?!” Kuzaku grabbed Haruhiro’s arm and shook him. “Shihoru-san went to the washroom ages ago, and she hasn’t come back! I probably shouldn’t say it like this, but I thought she just had the shits or something at first! But it’s been too long for that! I went looking for her, and she’s gone!”

“Okay. Okay, I get it. Just calm down.”

“S-Sorry! Yeah, you’re right, I’ll calm down!”

Kuzaku moved away from Haruhiro and took a few deep breaths, in and out.

“S-S-So?! Wh-Wh-Wh-What do we do?! Haruhiro, what are we supposed to do?! Shihoru-san is missing! This is bad, right?! I have no clue what we’re supposed to do...!”

“Man, you didn’t calm down at all...”

“I couldn’t! Sorry!”

Haruhiro had Setora and Merry tell him about what happened, too.

Shihoru had left the room alone. Kuzaku had the annoying habit of inviting Haruhiro along any time he had to go to the washroom, but according to the women, Shihoru didn’t do anything like that. It wasn’t that Shihoru had come out and said she needed to go. But it was the only reason he could think of. Merry and Setora agreed on that. They said there hadn’t been anything out of the ordinary about her.

It was Setora who first said she was taking too long. Merry and Setora went to look for her in the washroom, and then Kuzaku joined the search after that. They had checked all of the first level of Tenboro Tower, where their room was, but they had yet to find her.

“Do you think... anyone saw Shihoru?” Haruhiro asked.

There were around fifty people — black cloaks and soldiers from the Expeditionary Force — in Tenboro Tower at all times.

“We tried asking.” Kuzaku frowned. “Everyone says they haven’t seen her, or they don’t know. Some of them even blatantly ignored us. They weren’t cooperating at all. What’s with those guys? They seriously piss me off.”

“Honestly, I don’t know enough to decide what to think.” Setora turned to Merry and asked, “Is Shihoru the sort of person who would suddenly disappear by herself?”

Merry shook her head.

“I don’t think so. She wouldn’t want to cause trouble for everyone. She feels that more strongly than anyone.”

“In that case...” Setora looked at Haruhiro.

It seemed improbable that Shihoru would disappear on her own. Shihoru had left the room to go to the washroom, or something like that. She had meant to come back right away, but someone prevented her. Now, at this very moment, Shihoru was in a situation that meant she couldn’t return to the room where her comrades were waiting for her.

Haruhiro ground his teeth. He touched the spot where his neck and shoulders met. It was really stiff.

“...Hiyomu was there. In the dining hall.”

“Hiyo...?!” Kuzaku shouted. “Wait, *her*?! Huhhhh?!”

“The general teamed up with Hiyomu at some point. Also, the general... apparently plans to form an alliance with the goblins.”

“Go-Go-Gob...? Wh-Wh-Wh-What? What the hell is that about?!”

“This is related to Shihoru’s disappearance. Is that what you’re thinking?” Setora was as calm as ever.

“I don’t know,” Haruhiro answered truthfully. “But I think the general plans to send us to Damuro. He only hinted at it, never said it outright. The general wants to use us as pawns. But... he doesn’t trust us.”

Merry inhaled sharply.

“You don’t mean... he’s taken Shihoru hostage?”

“That makes sense,” Setora said dispassionately. “If it’s true, we’ll have no choice but to do as the general says, even if we don’t like it.”

Haruhiro and the others rushed out of the room. The general would either be in the great hall, the room with the fireplace that the Margrave had used as his living room, or perhaps the lord’s bedroom on the third floor.

However, four black cloaks had sealed off the stairs to the second floor.

“The general is upstairs, right? We have something to ask, so we want to see him.”

“We’re in a hurry here!”

No matter how Haruhiro or Kuzaku pressed them, the black cloaks would only say that the general had ordered that no one be allowed to pass. If he was left to his own devices, Kuzaku would have tried to bust his way through, but Haruhiro obviously had to stop him. Shihoru might have been taken hostage. They couldn’t act recklessly.

“Could you pass a message to the general, at least? Tell him I want to see him. Just that will do.”

“The general tasked us to be guards, not messengers. If we do things we haven’t been ordered to, we’ll incur the general’s wrath.”

The black cloaks were smiling faintly, even seeming to enjoy this.

“Fine, I get it!” Kuzaku sat down on the floor and crossed his arms. “I’m not moving from here until you let me through! I’ll sit here forever, so get used to it!”

The black cloaks roared with laughter.

“Well, now that you’ve said it, don’t you dare move.”

“I told you, I’m not gonna! You guys can change shifts, but I can’t. I’m gonna stick this out all on my own.”

“What is the point in doing that?” Setora asked in exasperation, and Kuzaku

turned around.

“The point? The point is... Uh, I dunno. I just sort of thought I would? I wonder why. Like, I’m showing them my spirit, maybe...?”

Haruhiro put a hand on Kuzaku’s shoulder.

“We’re going, Kuzaku.”

“Huh? What do you mean we’re going?”

“Let’s head back to the room for now.”

“No, but...”

“We’re going.”

“...Okay.”

Kuzaku stood up. He slumped his shoulders and hung his head... and arched his eyebrows and pursed his lips.

If you’re going to look that depressed, you’ll make me feel down, too, so I wish you’d cut it out.

“Cheer up. ...I’ll think of something.”

“...’Kay.”

However, no matter how Haruhiro thought, no solution presented itself, and the time just slipped by.

Halfway through the night, Kuzaku was snoring. Setora was lying down with Kiichi in her arms. Merry looked like she couldn’t sleep.

Haruhiro left the room to check the situation at the stairs a number of times. There were always three to four black cloaks posted there. Was there some way he could use all the thief skills that Barbara had beaten into him to slip past them? He seriously considered it, but it was obviously too difficult.

He couldn’t help but think about Shihoru. What was happening to her? He didn’t think they’d do anything horrendous to her. Or he wanted to believe that. Well, if she was a hostage, they had to treat her with some degree of care. They would be demanding something in exchange for the hostage’s safety. If he used some common sense, that was how it would work, but was that thinking

correct? This was Jin Mogis. *All I need to do is not kill her. So long as she's alive, she has value as a hostage.* He couldn't guarantee the general wouldn't think that way. Actually, it seemed entirely plausible he would.

What was Shihoru doing now? Even if she was safe, she must have been locked up and deprived of her freedom. Obviously, she'd be even more uneasy than Haruhiro. She was a girl, after all.

Right. He was trying not to say it outright, but *that* was what he was worried about.

Her being a woman made things different.

It was huge.

The Expeditionary Force were all men. But they weren't well-mannered ones. In fact, most of them didn't even rise to the level of basic decency.

The fact was, Merry, Shihoru, and Setora had been targeted by soldiers from the Expeditionary Force before this, too. Up until now, the damage had been limited to lewd remarks and ogling, but there was no telling when a drunk soldier might lose control and assault them. Despite that, he had been under the impression the risk was limited inside Tenboro Tower.

Had he let his guard down? Maybe.

He should have been more cautious. Even if they were inside Tenboro Tower, they shouldn't have been moving around on their own. He should have told them that. If she were with Merry or Setora, even if they'd been surrounded by multiple black cloaks, they wouldn't have been captured easily.

I didn't anticipate this at all.

I was naive.

Because of that, Shihoru had been confined somewhere, all alone. If that was all that had happened to her, then good. Shihoru was likely bound so that she couldn't run away. There had to be a guard, too.

The general might not have said it was okay to hurt Shihoru. But would her guards be able to maintain their professionalism? Haruhiro didn't have much hope of that.

This might not have been the time to be worrying about the black cloaks. It was possible that he ought to resort to force if necessary, find Shihoru as fast as he could, and rescue her. If he didn't, something irreversible might happen. The possibility was there, at least.

It might already be too late. Shihoru was in danger. But for now, she was still okay. That's why he had to hurry. Haruhiro was trying to convince himself of that, but he had no clear grounds to believe it.

They probably wouldn't kill her. Wasn't even that an optimistic assumption? From the general's perspective, all he needed to do was convince Haruhiro and the rest of the group that he had a hostage. The hostage didn't need to be alive. *The hostage is alive. Do as I say, and I'll give her back.* If he could control them with a lie like that, that would be enough for him.

In the worst case, Shihoru might be tortured, then killed.

They wouldn't do it, he wanted to believe. If it happened, Haruhiro would likely never be the same. No, it wasn't a question of whether or not he'd be okay. He'd just make Jin Mogis and everyone who hurt Shihoru pay. He would show absolutely no forgiveness. He'd kill them to the last man, no matter what it took.

With one of his comrades abducted, his imagination wandered all sorts of places, more of them bad than good. It shook him badly, and left him emotionally exhausted.

If the general had chosen this method knowing what it would do to him, that was terrifying.

If Haruhiro were in the general's position, even if the idea had occurred to him, or one of his subordinates had suggested it, he'd hesitate to do it. No, he couldn't do it. It wasn't impossible for him, but he wouldn't put the plan into action. But Jin Mogis likely would.

Maybe he got the idea from Hiyomu. It seemed like something that woman would come up with. Not that Haruhiro would know. He hardly knew anything about Hiyomu. He didn't want to know her.

Whatever the case, there was one thing he had to acknowledge, as much as

he didn't want to.

This was a really effective move.

Up until Neal knocked on their door the next morning, Haruhiro didn't get so much as a wink of sleep.

"The general is calling for you people. Sounds like he wants to talk about something over breakfast."

7. We Simply Stood There in Confusion

Damuro, situated about four kilometers northwest of Alterna, was once known as the second city of the Kingdom of Arabakia. Its origins were ancient. People had been living there since time immemorial. For all that time, when humans came south for any reason, the majority of them crossed the Quickwind Plains and gathered in the place called Damuro. Some of them settled, building houses and living there for generations. Eventually the Kingdom of Arabakia installed a magistrate, and began to administer the territory.

The former human stronghold was divided into the Old City and the New City.

The nearby buildings had no doubt been two stories at one point in time, but now only a handful of them were still intact. Those things sticking up out of the rubble, were those pillars? There was a little animal walking across a beam sitting on top of the pillars. That enclosure with the varying height, was it a fence, or a wall?

Nothing but ruins, ruins, ruins, as far as the eye could see. Not many of the buildings had their walls and roofs fully intact. In fact, it was probably fair to say none of them did.

“Sure is quiet...” Kuzaku mumbled.

Instantly, off in the distance, there was a cry of, “Aaagahhh!”

“...Cripes.” Neal complained with a sniffle. “I sure drew one hell of a short straw.”

That’s our line.

Haruhiro would have liked nothing more than to say that, but he didn’t want to talk to Neal. He had to avoid getting shaken up. He wasn’t doing this because he wanted to, but if he was going to do it, he was going to do it without casualties. Even if he had a sneaking suspicion that it might be incredibly difficult to actually do that.

“There sure are a lot of them, huh? They’re all over the place. It’s Gobby McGobgob and his gobby friends.”

Who knew what she thought she was doing, but that brazen twintailed bitch was walking next to Haruhiro, snickering. Screw her.

Haruhiro didn’t like thinking of her as “that bitch.” But how could he not? First, he hated the way she looked. Her voice and manner of speech were unpleasant. Even her body heat and general presence were upsetting. Hiyomu’s very being, every aspect of it, rubbed Haruhiro the wrong way.

Just by standing at his side, she caused incredibly dark emotions to well up inside him. Intense loathing and hatred. He was a little surprised, and mildly shocked. He never knew he could detest someone this much. It even made him think, *Isn’t this kind of abnormal?*

Not having any memory of his former self, Haruhiro didn’t really know what he had been like. But he couldn’t have been a good person. Good people didn’t hate others like this. Even if it was Hiyomu.

No, maybe Hiyomu was an exception. It was her, after all.

Somehow, Haruhiro wanted to deny that Hiyomu was within arms’ reach of him. How much happier would he be if he could forget? It was impossible, of course. He could never erase it from his memory. Because it was a matter of fact that Hiyomu was right there.

Did he have no choice but to accept it, in the end? But he hated her. He didn’t want to accept it.

He knew. He wasn’t a child, so he had to put up with things he didn’t like. Everyone did. They endured, biding their time. He had to focus.

They weren’t walking particularly fast, but his pulse was racing. It was Hiyomu’s fault. He was getting pissed off again. Not good. He needed to breathe as calmly as he could, and broaden his field of vision. To observe himself, no, to observe the group from an overhead view.

When he did that, it was inevitable that he would see Hiyomu, too, but he just had to imagine she was a moving carrot or something.

Was that an insult to carrots? Carrots never did him any wrong. He didn't particularly like them, though. Well, he didn't hate them, either.

A carrot. Maybe this was a better idea than he thought? If he didn't like or hate them, then the presence of one wouldn't put him on edge.

A carrot.

Hiyomu is a moving carrot.

I don't have anything against carrots, and this feels a bit forced, but that's what I'm going to tell myself.

Haruhiro and the carrot were practically side by side, at the front of the group, with Kuzaku, Merry, Setora, and Kiichi behind them, and Neal at the very rear.

"Ahh!" and "Gyah!" the goblins continued shouting in the distance.

Yes.

This was the Old City of Damuro, a den of goblins.

They could see goblins on the roofs, and on the second floors of collapsing buildings. Goblins poked their faces out of the rubble, and the shadows of pillars, too.

When Haruhiro and the others approached, the goblins all hid. That, or fled.

Sometimes they would shout to intimidate the group. Just once, a goblin threw rocks at them from a spot they couldn't hope to reach.

Regardless, for the moment, they showed no sign of attacking. The goblins of the Old City were watching the group uneasily to see what they would do.

"They're just a bunch of loser gobs who got run out of the New City, after all."

The moving carrot was acting smug. He hoped that attitude would make the carrot careless, so it would slip up and get in trouble. But in this situation, that would affect them, too. It was tough. Wasn't there any way that something bad could happen to just the carrot?

"The trash gobs of the Old City can't defy the gob king. They know they can't do a thing against a serious group of human volunteer soldiers. They're just

worthless little pieces of trash. You can go ahead and ignore them. If we act like we own the place, they aren't gonna mess with us."

Haruhiro and the others remained silent. It looked like he wasn't alone in his thinking. Merry, Setora, and Kuzaku had no intention of communicating with the carrot, either.

The moving carrot clicked its tongue. It looked like it was annoyed at being ignored, despite the fact it was nothing but a carrot.

After some time, Neal opened his mouth.

"Well, that's about how it feels, yeah..."

Neal was General Jin Mogis's man, and the moving carrot was a representative of his ally. As far as Neal was concerned, even if it was a moving carrot he was dealing with, he had to be reasonably considerate. Was that it?

Haruhiro wished the two of them would keep each other company. For his part, he wanted as little to do with either of them as possible, and to get what he needed to do done safely. He wanted Shihoru back, too.

This was the mission entrusted to Haruhiro and his party:

Slip through the Old City of Damuro into the New City.

Meet with Gwagajin, the king, or mogado, of the goblins.

Deliver Jin Mogis's request, and receive an answer.

Return to Alterna, and convey Mogado Gwagajin's response to the general.

They hadn't actually been able to get a statement from the general that he had, in fact, abducted Shihoru, but he did say, "If you fulfill your duties, everything will be where it belongs." That had to mean he would release Shihoru unharmed. If it didn't, Haruhiro and the others would have to take action, with no further room for discussion. They weren't going to hold back if it came to that.

Also, Neal was their watcher. The moving carrot was apparently going to negotiate with Mogado Gwagajin. It was hard to imagine being able to communicate with goblins, but apparently this carrot could. Was it because it was a carrot? He didn't understand the logic, but apparently it had a way to.

They wouldn't be walking into the goblin stronghold if it didn't.

No matter how you looked at it, this couldn't possibly be safe.

Damuro was straight up enemy territory.

On top of that, Alterna had been occupied by the goblins until just recently.

They'd killed a lot of humans.

That wasn't all. They'd eaten the corpses.

The goblins apparently ate their own kind, too, so they might not have meant any special insult by it.

What's wrong with eating the dead? You people eat the meat of animals, too, don't you?

If they said that to him, he'd struggle to find a response. But even setting that aside, goblins were blatantly hostile to humanity.

Though, according to the moving carrot, the goblins of the New City were nothing like the ones of the Old City. These were the lowliest members of goblin society, the dregs.

The Old City goblins looked pitiful compared to the ones that had occupied Alterna. Though there was individual variance, on the whole, none of them looked all that big or sturdy. Even when the Southern Expedition attacked, they apparently didn't bother to mobilize the goblins of the Old City.

Haruhiro didn't know if he was lucky or unlucky to have forgotten this, but around five years ago, Haruhiro and his party had come to the Old City of Damuro on a daily basis.

What had they been coming here to do? Not to have picnics, that was for sure. It was work. They were making a living. Hunting. The party had been hunting goblins. The Old City of Damuro was an ideal hunting ground for newly minted volunteer soldiers.

Many volunteer soldier trainees had built experience here in the Old City, and grown used to killing living creatures with their own hands. They went on to become full-fledged volunteer soldiers, and then left the nest. Haruhiro must have been one such fledgling.

But goblins were living beings, too. Naturally, they didn't take it lying down.

In their trainee days, Haruhiro's party had lost a comrade named Manato. He knew that because Merry had told him about it.

They'd avenged him. Haruhiro and his party had taken revenge against the goblins of the Old City.

Kill, and be killed, then kill, and be killed again. It wasn't just unfortunate, it was a vicious cycle. If they didn't break the chain somewhere, it would never end. Still, whether he remembered it or not, Haruhiro had killed goblins from the Old City. He was a murderer.

Let's stop the meaningless killing.

He was in no position to utter those words, so he wouldn't say them. If the goblins of the Old City attacked them, he'd fight back without hesitation. He wouldn't show any mercy, either. But if fighting could be avoided, that was for the better.

I guess that's not how this is going to go, huh?

"Gungyah!" a goblin shouted.

It was close.

Behind him.

Haruhiro turned around. It was in a ruin, about ten meters behind them on the left. The building was two floors, but mostly destroyed. Only about half of each floor remained. There it was. On the second floor. A goblin. Wearing a suit of chain mail that was full of holes. Was that a spear in its hands? It was a short spear. Was it planning to throw it? It had already begun the throwing motion.

"Kuzaku...!"

Even before Haruhiro called his name, Kuzaku was drawing his large katana. He turned and charged. The spear flew. Kuzaku swatted it aside with one swing. Neal shouted.

"That was dangerous!"

No, you should have noticed!

Haruhiro drew his dagger as he looked around, mentally cursing Neal.

What do we have you in the back for? Don't drop your guard. Be useful if you're going to take up oxygen!

"The hell was that?! You're just a shitty little goooob!"

Eyes darting around, the moving carrot clutched its little plushie hair decoration, or whatever it was. Though it didn't look like it, that hairpiece was a genuine relic.

"Move it!"

When Haruhiro raced towards the ruin ahead of them on their right, everyone followed him without delay.

It was a single-story building. Two thirds of the walls were intact. But the ceiling had caved in. There were no goblins inside. He was able to confirm that at a glance.

With their backs to the ruin, they positioned themselves so that their collective field of vision covered all directions. Kiichi clambered up the wall and stood atop a support beam.

Neal, for all his other failings, was still an active scout. So long as he didn't let his guard down, he could do most things. But that even the moving carrot was cooperative and willing to act as one of the party was a little surprising. Hiyomu the moving carrot's past was unclear, but she might have had some experience as a volunteer soldier.

"Five to the south," Setora said in a calm voice.

"West, three," Merry continued.

"Five to the east, I guess?" Kuzaku cocked his head to the side. "Nah, six. Could be eight."

He was being vague, so Neil corrected him.

"There's got to be more than ten. Where are your eyes?"

Haruhiro took a sweeping glance at the goblins his comrades had found.

"They're organized..."

They weren't an unruly mob. They had a leader. Where was it?

"It looks like they're gonna attack from the east. I'll hold them back," Kuzaku readied his large katana. "I'll be fine with minimal support."

"The enemies to the south and west are trying to meet up. Isn't the east a diversion?" Setora said plainly.

"The north is suspicious," Hiyomu said. "Just now, one of the little critters poked its head out, then hid. That gob's super shifty."

"Leave this to us," Neal said with a nasty laugh, then shoved Haruhiro's shoulder. "Get out there, hero."

Should I kick him? Haruhiro thought for a moment. Obviously, he wasn't going to do something so pointless.

The north, huh? He didn't see any goblins that fit the bill now. Could he trust what Hiyomu said? He didn't trust her one iota as a person. However, if they couldn't get out of this situation, Hiyomu was in trouble, too. Besides, it wasn't as if Hiyomu and the master of the Forbidden Tower were out to harm Haruhiro and his party. Who was the master of the Forbidden Tower? That wasn't clear at this point, but he or she had to have some goal. They were trying to use Haruhiro and his group to accomplish it.

"Kuzaku, meet the enemy in the center. Setora, you take command. I'll find and eliminate the enemy's leader."

Haruhiro didn't wait for a response. He sank into the ground. That was the mental image he used. —Stealth.

He immediately moved away from where he was and headed north. He didn't wander around in the middle of the road. To the best of his ability, he used the ruins, rubble, and the shadows they cast to hide himself as he went.

Once in a while, he cut across the road. He had no fear. He had a sense — an intuition, that was all he could think to call it — for when he would be found. This time, he wouldn't.

Kuzaku and the others were fighting. He didn't turn back to look. They were fine. He could leave this to them.

He didn't search. If he went looking, he'd actually be more likely to miss what he wanted to find. He took a broad, broad view of the entire scene. If anything moved, any shape or color seemed out of place, his attention turned towards it on its own.

He found it. A goblin. Their skin was generally a yellowish green. The ruins were covered in moss, ivy, and vines, so that provided some degree of camouflage. But they still stood out when they moved.

Ahead of him on the right, around thirty meters away, there was a large, two-story ruin. The first floor was solid. The second floor was half destroyed, like it was some sort of badly crumbling terrace.

Haruhiro pressed his back to the outer wall of a nearby ruin, and observed the terrace in question. There were two goblins up there now. They were crouching in the shadow of a boxy piece of furniture that was lying on its side, occasionally poking their heads out from behind it.

Was it just those two? No. Two thirds of the second floor had been reduced to looking like a terrace, but the remaining third still had a ceiling and walls. There was a set of stairs there, too.

One goblin climbed the stairs. Was it trying to join up with the pair above? It kept its posture low, rushing into the shadow of the piece of furniture.

Haruhiro headed toward the goblins' position. The goblins on the terrace were remaining alert of their surroundings. He had to be a little careful, too.

He reached the ruin. The second floor terrace was above Haruhiro's head. The wall was thick with ivy. There was a single window about three meters ahead of him. He tried approaching it.

He heard voices. Goblins' voices. Inside the ruin, the goblins were talking. Was it two or three of them? Could there be more?

He peered through the window into the building. It was a large room. There were stairs in the back. He saw six, seven — eight goblins.

One came down the stairs. Another goblin went up to take its place.

A stool, no, a table? One of the goblins was sitting on a table. That goblin

alone looked like it had better equipment. It was somewhat ill-fitting, but it was still copper armor, and it was even wearing a helmet, too. The armor and helmet sparkled. It must have polished them carefully. There were a number of daggers, probably four, hanging at its waist, and a longsword slung over its back.

That's the leader, thought Haruhiro. The others were clearly subservient to that one.

In addition to the helmet gob, there were four goblins that were carrying crossbows. The crossbow gobs required caution. Even with Merry here, taking a crossbow bolt to anywhere vital would still be bad news.

Haruhiro moved another five meters or so along the wall. This looked like the way in and out. There was no door. It was a simple hole, tall and thin. There were signs of ivy having recently been cleared away.

He looked in through the entrance. Too far. The helmet gob was seven, eight meters away. The window had been closer. Even there it had been five meters, and they were obviously going to notice if he came in through the window.

Haruhiro decided to clamber up the wall, in the area where the second floor still had its walls and ceiling. It seemed like a good spot. The ivy couldn't support Haruhiro's weight. It would snap. Using the protrusions of the stonework as hand-and footholds, he rapidly ascended to the second floor's roof.

The roof was tiled. Haruhiro crawled forward, taking care not to break it. He looked down at the terrace. Was the boxy piece of furniture a dresser? Three goblins were huddled close in its shadow.

One goblin stuck its head out from behind the dresser. It looked around, then quickly ducked down again.

Those goblins were lookouts. There were probably two up there at all times, with another as a messenger. Three total, huh?

If it was just two, he could snuff them both in the same instant. The third would raise a ruckus. The goblins below would detect something was amiss. No good.

The lookout goblins were only paying attention to things outside this ruin. It wasn't possible for him to finish off all three at once. But he didn't really need to eliminate the lookouts. Right. This would work.

Haruhiro turned around and lowered himself down the wall to the terrace floor.

One goblin had poked its head out from behind the dresser, and was looking around restlessly. But it didn't notice Haruhiro at all.

Haruhiro headed for the stairs. The lookout goblins still hadn't noticed him. There was no sign of one coming up the stairs, either.

Haruhiro climbed down the stairs, his hand going to the hilt of his dagger. There was a landing in the middle. Even without descending that far, if he crouched he could look out over the first floor.

It was roughly two meters from the bottom of the stairs on the first floor to where the helmet gob was sitting. The four crossbow gobs were close to the table, and the other four were a little farther away.

The helmet gob said something, and the crossbow gobs let out what sounded like a laugh. Then the other gobs laughed and clapped, too. Yeah, the helmet gob was definitely the leader. The crossbow gobs were his close followers, and the other goblins were probably in a position of servitude. The power dynamic was readily apparent.

Haruhiro pulled his dagger. He knew what he had to do. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say he could see it. The video played out inside his head. Haruhiro just had to follow it.

He climbed down the stairs. He'd be at the landing soon.

The helmet gob said something again. The goblins laughed.

He passed the landing, and descended farther.

The helmet gob had its right side facing towards him. Two of the crossbow gobs must have had Haruhiro in their field of vision, too. They should have been able to see him, but it never occurred to them that Haruhiro would be there, and they still hadn't noticed. But they could at any moment.

He reached the bottom of the stairs. The helmet gob was practically right in front of him.

If I stop now, I'll definitely botch this.

That thought made him stiffen. He kept moving.

Haruhiro tried to circle around behind the helmet gob. With just two steps to go, one of the crossbow gobs gulped. It was looking at him, eyes bulging. He'd been spotted.

He made a point of thinking, *What, finally?* Panicking would be the worst thing he could do. He had to either bail now or go through with it, and he couldn't delay.

Haruhiro jumped on the helmet gob. He wrapped his left arm around its neck from behind. The helmet was too big for this goblin, and easily slid aside. Exposing its neck, he stabbed the dagger he was holding with a backhand grip into it. The helmet gob started to thrash around just before that. It was too late.

Keeping the helmet gob, which had died instantly, held in his left arm, Haruhiro bolted towards the exit.

One of the crossbow gobs leveled their weapon at Haruhiro. He planned to use the helmet gob as a shield if it fired. It didn't.

The goblins started to make a lot of noise. By that point, Haruhiro was already outside.

Discarding the helmet gob's corpse as he left, he ran to the place where he'd climbed up to the second floor earlier. The crossbow gobs came out of the ruin, chasing after Haruhiro. But he was already climbing the wall, a dagger clutched in his mouth. The goblins couldn't find Haruhiro.

He climbed up onto the second floor's roof. The goblins on the terrace were looking down, screeching as they tried to figure out what was happening. They were confused and panicked. That made it easy.

He dropped to the terrace. A dagger thrust through one lookout gob's back killed it instantly. The other lookout gob was leaning over the edge of the terrace. Haruhiro booted it off, then tackled the remaining goblin and slit its

throat.

The lookout gob cried “Gyah!” as it fell to the street below, but this was only the second floor. From the ground, it quickly rolled to its feet, and looked up at Haruhiro.

“Ngyahgwoah!”

He had no idea what it was actually saying, but he assumed that meant something like, *It’s the enemy! He’s over there!*

Two of the crossbow gobs took aim at Haruhiro. He got down just as the bolts flew towards him. The projectiles sailed by, way over his head. They were followed immediately by another two. The bolts, fired from below, stood no chance of hitting Haruhiro on the terrace.

The crossbow gobs were shouting. Judging by the sounds they made, a number of goblins had raced back into the ruin. They were climbing the stairs, intending to attack Haruhiro up on the terrace.

Haruhiro bounced to his feet, and immediately threw himself from the terrace. There were three crossbow gobs down below. Was the other one inside the ruins with the other goblins?

Landing, he closed in on a crossbow gob. It looked awfully surprised. When he got in position to tackle it, the goblin didn’t spin its crossbow around, but held it forward, trying to shield itself. It was absolutely terrified, and ready to run away.

Haruhiro didn’t tackle it; he instead grabbed the crossbow with his left hand. The crossbow gob reflexively pulled the crossbow closer, trying to stop him from seizing it. When Haruhiro let go, the crossbow gob pitched forward. Now off balance, the crossbow gob’s back was exposed, and he was able to plant a dagger in it effortlessly.

For whatever reason, he knew which stabs would be lethal, just what angle to strike at, and how deep, as if it were second nature to him. That seemed messed up, even to him, but it did make things easier.

There were two crossbow gobs left. One was fleeing into the ruin. The other threw its crossbow at him. He dodged the incoming weapon, then closed in on

the goblin.

Striking the crossbow gob in the jaw with the palm of his hand, he swept its legs from under it with a trip. A slash to the throat left the goblin unable to breathe. Blood flowed from its carotid artery. Now, only death awaited.

He jumped into the ruin, and the crossbow gob that fled was there facing away from him. He pounced on it, and thrust his dagger through a vital point in its back.

Only one crossbow gob to go. The other four goblins had been halfway up the stairs, chasing him. They turned around. Screeched loudly. They were pretty badly panicked. They were afraid of Haruhiro.

Of course they were. He was soaked head to toe in goblin blood. He may have done this out of necessity, but the goblins weren't going to believe that. A human mass murderer showed up, and was killing their comrades one after another. In the goblin's eyes, Haruhiro must have been a monster.

He'd be lying if he said that didn't hurt a little. But he couldn't let up on them. Haruhiro pursued the crossbow gob. Its legs must have given out, because it collapsed when it got to the landing.

"...Damn it."

Haruhiro snatched its crossbow, and kicked it in the butt.

"Leave us alone. You guys don't want to die, either, do you?"

No matter what he said, they wouldn't understand. But though they didn't speak his language, he still hoped that the threat would work.

Still holding the crossbow, Haruhiro turned his back to the crossbow gob.

The crossbow gob didn't move. The other goblins up top were staying put, too.

When he reached the exit, Haruhiro turned back to look at them. The crossbow gob and the other goblins looked at him. They were all trembling.

Haruhiro tossed the crossbow to the floor, and the goblins all jumped. He'd probably intimidated them enough. He hoped so. If he hadn't, he was going to have to kill more. He wanted to avoid that, as much as possible.

“...Not that I’m in any position to be saying I don’t want to kill after everything I’ve done.”

Haruhiro left the ruin. He moved away, and watched from a short distance. The goblins weren’t coming out yet. He didn’t see goblins on the second floor terrace, either. Did they think he was outside, waiting to ambush them?

“Did I overdo it...?”

Haruhiro hurried back to his comrades. He could tell they had already settled things on their end, too.

It looked like everyone was okay. More than ten goblins lay dead. Most of them had been carved up with Kuzaku’s large katana.

“Good work, man,” said Kuzaku. He was acting awfully cheerful and casual about all this, considering he was bloodier than Haruhiro. It was kind of deflating.

“Well, I don’t know if I’d call it *good* work.”

“The Old City gobs just can’t put up a proper fight. Maybe I’m too strong?”

“Don’t get cocky, you fool.” Setora jabbed Kuzaku in the shoulder.

“Nah, I was kidding, okay?”

“If you’re joking, then make it sound like a joke.”

“He’s such a silly billy, isn’t he?” Hiyomu piped up. Kuzaku looked hurt.

“I don’t want to hear that from *you*...”

Neal was smiling faintly. It looked like he wanted to agree. Even if his position meant that he had to be considerate of Hiyomu’s feelings, he had to be fed up with her.

“How did you do?” Merry asked Haruhiro. Haruhiro nodded reflexively, but he didn’t want to go into it.

“...I eliminated what I assume was their leader. Let’s move on.”

“Kiichi!”

When Setora called his name, Kiichi nimbly jumped down from the top of the

ruined building.

Haruhiro took a deep breath. He needed to get serious again. He'd driven off the gang that the helmet gob was leading. But that was all. Other groups might still attack them.

Merry came over to him. He thought she might ask, "Are you okay?" If she did, he'd have to say that, obviously, he was. But that wasn't it.

Merry grabbed Haruhiro's left hand, and checked his wrist.

"The magic's worn off."

"...Oh. Yeah, it has."

Merry had cast the God of Light Lumiaris's support magic spells Protection and Assist with Haruhiro, Kuzaku, Setora, and herself, along with Hiyomu and Neal, as the six targets. Once cast, the effect had a duration of around thirty minutes, so Merry would recast it before then.

The two hexagrams of different colors were still shining on Merry's left wrist. It looked like Kuzaku and the rest had them, too. Apparently, the magic had worn off because Haruhiro strayed too far from Merry.

"I'll recast it."

Merry was still holding Haruhiro's wrist as she made the sign of the hexagram with the fingers of her opposite hand.

"O Light, may Lumiaris's divine protection be upon you... Protection. — Assist."

Two hexagrams lit up on Haruhiro's wrist as he watched.

Instantly, his body and heart felt lighter. He hadn't known Merry's magic affected the heart, too.

"Thanks."

"Think nothing of it." Merry smiled.

Huh? Haruhiro thought suspiciously. *What is this? My chest feels weird. It hurts.*

It wasn't cold, but he had goosebumps. There was a rustling in the back of his neck. His throat seized up, and he couldn't speak.

"What's wrong?" Merry cocked her head to the side.

No, it's nothing, he wanted to say, but his mouth just flapped futilely, failing to form words.

"Ah!" Merry let go of Haruhiro's wrist, and lowered her head. Her cheeks were flushed. Her ears were red. "Sorry," Merry apologized in a small voice, pulling her own hair. "I was just... just checking. That's all. Really."

"...Yeah."

Haruhiro lowered his eyes, too. Merry was rushing her words out, as if she were making excuses, but why? Honestly, he didn't know. It wasn't just Merry, either. He was pretty flustered, too. Why was he panicking like this?

He couldn't get her shy expression out of his head. Of course not. She was right in front of his eyes. If he raised his eyes even a little, he could see it all he wanted.

But I can't look.

My heart's racing like crazy.

This is bad, isn't it? This state I'm in. I need to settle down. If I don't clear my head, we can't move forward.

What's happened to me?

Somebody, please tell me.

Not that I could ever ask.

8. The Experienced and Dangerous Maiden of Twilight

Haruhiro was a wall.

Metaphorically, of course. Was he a ceiling, a window, a pillar, or a wall? He felt like he was kind of a wall, but not a literal wall. The actual wall here was the one he was pressed up against, holding his breath.

Though, speaking of the wall, it wasn't a wooden wall, a stonework wall, or even a dirt wall. No, not exactly a dirt wall, that was clear, but it was likely made of earthen material. Did they use some special dirt? Or mix something into it? It was thick with moss, and pretty hard, too. He'd tried poking it with his dagger, but it couldn't penetrate it very well, so it might have been fair to say it was really hard. Nearly as hard as rock, at least.

This wall, which separated the Old City of Damuro from the New City, was only four to five meters high, but lacked the uneven surface of a stonework wall, making it difficult to climb. Though, if he had a ladder, or some other tools, that would be another story. However, there were spots where the wall bulged up, and in those spots it had a number of holes. Those were obviously watchtowers. He wasn't sure if it was at all times, but there were presumably goblins stationed in there. On top of that, there were armed goblins walking along the top of the wall, too. If he tried to scale it, he'd be found instantly, for sure.

There were places where it looked possible to enter or exit.

Haruhiro had personally spotted three wooden, steel-framed gates that had been placed in holes dug out of the wall.

However, there were always a large number of goblins at each gate, and it was clear they were guarding them. If they were going to enter through the gates, it would have to be with brute force. That might not be impossible, but it was like stirring up a hornets' nest. Probably not the best idea.

His comrades were waiting nearby in one of the relatively intact ruins in the Old City. Haruhiro and Neal had split off to scout a little after noon, and it was already dusk now.

Haruhiro was still unable to find a way to infiltrate the New City.

Because of the low wall, escape should be easy. Entering without being detected, on the other hand, would be incredibly difficult.

Wasn't that the same for the goblins? If they left the New City and fell to become Old City goblins, there was practically no way for them to go back. In their trainee days, Haruhiro and other volunteer soldiers like him had gone around massacring those goblins to make ends meet. He was still sorting out his feelings about that.

Setting that aside, he wanted to see what would happen once it was dark out. That was why Haruhiro had become one with the wall, and now waited for sundown.

Even as he did so, there were goblins walking above him, but he had not been discovered. It wasn't that the lookout goblins were especially inattentive, this was just how things went when a thief became a wall.

Eventually, the sun set.

The area grew darker by the moment.

Light began to leak from the watchtowers. They must have lit fires inside. The goblins patrolling the walls above were carrying torches, or something similar, too.

Haruhiro moved away from the wall for a while, broadly surveilling the New City from the Old City. The watchtowers were generally placed about thirty to forty meters apart. There weren't too many goblins patrolling, but it wasn't a small number, either. At a glance, it looked like there was one maybe every fifty meters or so. No, not one. It looked like there were two goblins to a patrol. That hadn't been the case when it was bright out. Did it change after dark?

He saw the patrols stopping, then turning their torches towards the Old City. They were taking their work more seriously than he had expected.

“...This is rough.”

If Haruhiro were alone, it wouldn't be impossible for him to infiltrate the New City. He would wait for there to be no goblin patrol nearby, then speedily climb over the wall at the midpoint between two of the watchtowers. He'd probably need some sort of tools. A ladder, or maybe a platform.

However, once he climbed up, he'd be leaving that tool in the Old City. His tool needed to be set up, and then taken down. He needed someone's help. Did that mean he couldn't do it alone after all?

Haruhiro headed for the ruin where his comrades were waiting. Neal had already made it back when he arrived. The rest of the group was sitting in a circle around a hooded lamp that had been placed on the ground.

“This is hopeless.”

Much as he hated to, Haruhiro had to agree with Neal.

“I think we should give up on getting everyone into the New City. If we go, it should be a small number of us. They'll need help, too. It would be easiest with a ladder, but if Kuzaku were to give me a boost, I might be able to get over the wall.”

“There's no *if* we go,” Hiyomu said, clicking her tongue. “We have to go, we have no other choice. So we're going. Do you people stiiiill not understand that? If you don't, aren't you unbelievably stupid?”

Nobody said a word.

Obviously, Haruhiro was ticked off. Everyone had to be. But reacting to everything Hiyomu said was just exhausting.

“Honestly, you people are just beyond help...”

Hiyomu rubbed her hip as she grumbled. Haruhiro and his group had shoulder bags packed with portable rations, water skins, and more. But Hiyomu had packed awfully light, with only a single small pouch wrapped around her hip.

She produced a folded piece of paper from that pouch, and spread it out close to the lamp.

“A map?” Setora whispered.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Hiyomu glared at Setora. Maybe it wasn’t so much that her personality had suddenly gotten worse, but more that she was irritated? Merry leaned in and looked at the map.

“Is this... the New City?”

“Hmm.” Kuzaku squinted at it, cocking his head to the side. “It’s hard to see.”

“Then don’t look. You’re soooo annoying, you dolt.” Hiyomu sighed. “You see this? This is the one and only map of the New City of Damuro in existence, okay? Try being a little more grateful, even if all you have is your size, and you can’t even use it properly. You pervert with a premature ejaculation problem.”

“Wasn’t that a little uncalled for...?”

“If you don’t want the abuse, why don’t you zip your lips?”

“Right, I’ll shut up now.”

“Please do.”

“You kind of piss me off, you know that?”

“Weren’t you going to shut up?”

“I will now!”

Are you children?

Haruhiro looked down at the map. It was true that it wasn’t easy to read. The paper itself was old and worn, and the lines and text were faded. But on top of that, the scale was arbitrary. There were probably considerable shortcuts taken, and it was deformed in various ways. He suspected it was imprecise, and mainly focused on the relative positions of landmarks.

“It was maybe... twenty years ago now?” Hiyomu mumbled.

“Twenty years...” Merry said quietly. Hiyomu ignored her and continued.

“There was a great party that planned to capture the New City of Damuro. The Old City, as you know, is newbie-friendly gob hunting grounds, but the New City is pristine territory for volunteer soldiers. If there was such a wonderful new frontier so close to where you lived, you’d have to be cowardly, but at the same time unfeeling, to never even try to challenge it. So... that incredible party

brilliantly infiltrated the New City, and they made this map.”

Haruhiro glanced at Hiyomu with upturned eyes. Hiyomu was staring intently at the map. She seemed awfully concerned with the creases in it. Hiyomu traced the folds with her fingers, again and again.

“Obviously, a lot will have changed since then. It’s been twenty years, after all. Not a short time, by any means. That great party set up five bases inside the New City, and traveled between them as they explored, but...”

Hiyomu’s index finger moved across the surface of the map, pointing to a star shape. There were four other stars, too. Five in total.

“Who knows, really? Maybe we’ll be lucky if even one of them is left?”

Setora pointed to the mountain-like figure in roughly the middle of the map.

“What is this?”

Hiyomu glanced at Setora.

“Ahsvasin. Translated into human language, that would be, ‘the Highest Heaven.’ The Mogado is in the Highest Heaven. Mogado, by the way, is what goblins call their king. So, basically, the Highest Heaven is a castle.”

“I see.” Setora tapped an area in the bottom left of the map that had been blotted out. “Then what is this?”

“Ohdongo.”

When Hiyomu answered her, Kuzaku cocked his head to the side. “...Oh, don’t go?”

Haruhiro pressed a hand to his forehead and sighed. “Come on, man...”

“Nah, I kinda knew, okay? I knew it wasn’t that. But that’s what it sounded like to me.”

“The gobs speak a vulgar language, full of guttural sounds, after all.” Hiyomu said, frowning, then snorted. “Ohdongo. It means ‘the Deepest Valley.’ It’s where the ugoths are said to live. The ugoths are, well... like sages? They’re goblin intellectuals.”

It went without saying, humans and goblins were different. They were

bipedal. They were dexterous, and could use tools with their hands. They were social creatures. But despite these points of commonality, they were a completely different race.

Goblins were still a few ranks below humans. Haruhiro must not have been the only human who saw them that way. Hiyomu had called their language vulgar, after all. Humans naturally, without even questioning it, looked down on goblins.

“Now, you people wouldn’t know this, not even volunteer soldiers like Soma do, but the ugoths can speak the human language.”

Haruhiro’s eyes widened.

“...The human language?”

“That’s right.” Hiyomu laughed derisively at Haruhiro. “Come on, think about it. When the remnants of the Kingdom of Arabakia fled south of the Tenryu Mountains and Damuro became goblin territory, that was maybe around a hundred and forty years ago. Then the No-Life King died, despite allegedly being undying, or whatever it was that happened, a hundred, well, maybe a hundred and five years ago. The Kingdom of Arabakia started looking to make a comeback.”

“They built Alterna...” Merry mumbled to herself, and Setora furrowed her brow, scratching Kiichi’s throat as she did.

“How? Damuro is about a stone’s throw from Alterna. The goblins would have seen humans from the Kingdom of Arabakia as enemies, wouldn’t they?”

Kuzaku crossed his arms and groaned.

“You’d think they’d have tried to get in the way. It’d be impossible if you didn’t take the goblins out first, wouldn’t it?”

“Hah!” Hiyomu laughed. “That’s just what a musclehead would think.”

“Yeah, I know I’m just a musclehead...” Kuzaku moped.

Don’t accept it. Haruhiro thought, but set it aside to think about the Alterna problem.

“...The ugoths. There are goblins that speak the human language. The humans

built Alterna without interference... They avoided fighting? Because the humans and the goblins came to an agreement...?”

“They must have stood to benefit,” Setora said in a low voice. “And if the goblins gained something from not attacking the humans, the natural assumption would be that the humans gave them something in exchange.”

“This is going nowhere, since you’re all idiots. Let me help you out.” Hiyomu smirked at Setora, then thrust her hand into the pouch at her hip.

“Huh...?!”

Kuzaku’s eyes bugged out. Haruhiro was shocked, too.

He recognized the knife that came out of Hiyomu’s pouch. It was *that* knife. The one carried by the leader of the goblins once occupying Alterna, Viceroy Bogg. The whole thing was made of red metal. Bogg’s red knife had easily slit the throat of Dylan Stone, the commander of the raid team.

However, though he called it a knife, the blade was close to three centimeters across, and it had a solid handguard on it. If you included the pommel, the thing had to be a good forty-five centimeters long.

Would it fit? That knife? In the pouch at Hiyomu’s waist? Haruhiro wondered. Maybe it wouldn’t be impossible to stuff it in. But it was hard to imagine it fitting comfortably.

“That pouch...” Merry asked with a cautious look on her face, and Hiyomu patted the pouch with a look of realization.

“Ahh, obviously, this is a relic from my master, too. The ridiculous storage capacity this thing has is super convenient. Jealous? Well, I won’t give it to you, lend it to you, or even let you touch it for just a moment. Got it? Lay a finger on it, and you’re seriously dead, okay?”

“Relics sure are awesome, huh...?” Kuzaku was visibly impressed. What a straightforward guy.

“So awesome it’s hilarious.” Hiyomu sounded as full of herself as ever. “Just so we’re clear, this knife isn’t a relic, okay?”

“It’s simply made of a rare metal, then?”

When Setora asked, Hiyomu swung the knife and nodded.

“Looks like it. Long ago in the Kingdom of Arabakia, they called this hi’irogane. Don’t know what it’s made from, but if you smelt several metals mined in the Tenryu Mountains, it produces this sort of red alloy.”

“It sure is pretty, though.” Kuzaku nodded. “It really stands out, huh? So, the Kingdom of Arabakia made this... What was it? Hero’s cane?”

“Hi’irogane.”

When Haruhiro corrected him, Kuzaku scratched his head.

“Right, right. Hi’irogane, hi’irogane. That’s, what? Fire-colored? So, metal that’s scarlet, huh?”

“They...” Setora’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Gave it to the goblins?”

“The other theory is that it was hidden in Damuro all along.” Hiyomu spun the knife around and played with it. It didn’t look dangerous. She was used to it. “They may have just told the gobs where it was. But either way, the rare and valuable hi’irogane that was only found in Damuro all fell into the hands of the goblins.”

“Hmm...”

Kuzaku had a “So what?” look on his face. Hiyomu scoffed at him.

“You people, with your lack of imagination, might not get it, but this was a stupidly huge deal to the goblins. They’re an inferior race. And let me be clear, that’s not my personal view. There were many races, not just humans, that looked down on the goblins. The elves, the dwarves, and even the orcs and kobolds saw the goblins as mere animals. Though, even now that may not have changed much. I mean, they only beat out monkeys by a hair. Oh, but the gobs have smooth skin, so maybe it’s weird to say they beat them by a hair when they’re less hairy? Well, it’s just a metaphor.”

Those goblins had a monopoly on the valuable, limited supply of hi’irogane. This fact must have been far more important to the goblins than Haruhiro estimated.

Kuzaku punched his fist into his palm.

“Oh, I get it! That’s why only the important goblins were using weapons and armor made from hi’irogane. It’s a symbol of power? Or something...?”

“Well done.” Hiyomu’s beaming smile was creepy. “Do you want a pat on the head?”

“No, thanks...”

“When you say it like that, I just want to pat you more. Nuffuhuhuh.”

“Fine, go ahead and try it then.”

“Okaaaay.” Hiyomu reached out and patted Kuzaku on the head. “Patty, patty, patty, patty.”

“Cut it out!”

When Kuzaku brushed her hand away, Hiyomu grinned. If it wasn’t apparent by this point, her personality was so rotten it was scary.

“I see, that makes sense.” It was scary how calm Setora was, too.

“Our card in the negotiations is hi’irogane, huh? We return the hi’irogane equipment we scavenged from the goblins in Alterna. In exchange, they work with us. Isn’t that a little weak?”

Hiyomu thumped her chest with one hand.

“I’m the one in charge of negotiating. You people don’t need to think about it. You just do your jobs, and you’re good. Our goal is infiltrating the New City. Then to make contact with an ugoth we can talk to.”

Haruhiro pointed to the blacked-out section of the map.

“Ohdongo. The Deepest Valley. ...Is this the only place where there are ugoths?”

Hiyomu shook her head.

“There’s a number at Ahsvasin, too. They seem to serve the Mogado as advisors.”

Merry lowered her eyes.

“We have no choice but to find a way inside one of those two places...”

Kuzaku groaned and cocked his head to the side.

“Can’t we just waltz in, brandishing that hi’irogane knife? Even the lowest gobs know what it is, right? Won’t they be like, ‘Oh, that human’s got hi’irogane! Call an important person, wait, no, an important gob!’?”

“If you ask Hiyo...”

Hiyomu started referring to herself as Hiyo. Wasn’t she Hiyomu? Did it matter?

“I’d bet on, ‘It’s hi’irogane! Everyone take it back! Chaaaarge!’ instead. You haaaave to remember that no matter what we say, they can’t understand it. The gobs are our enemies. If we run into anything but an ugoth, it’s gonna be a fight to the death. That’s what we have to assume.”

“That’s why this was crazy to start with. Making an alliance with gobs...” Kuzaku muttered.

Hiyo glared at Kuzaku. She opened her mouth to say something, but just snorted instead.

Hiyo wasn’t optimistic about this, by any means. That might have been what that meant. Or, perhaps, her master, the one who controlled the Forbidden Tower, was moving out of necessity.

“Even if it’s crazy, or whatever else it is, we’re doing it.” Hiyo kept biting and licking her lips. “Master gave the order believing Hiyo could do it. It wasn’t an, ‘It’s okay if you mess it up,’ sort of thing. There’s a chance of success. A huge one. Anyway, we just need to meet an ugoth... If we can’t all make it into the New City, then...”

She had no choice. Neither did Haruhiro. It was almost certain that General Jin Mogis was keeping Shihoru in his custody. If the group didn’t show results, the general would probably hurt her.

“...I can get into the New City. If Kuzaku helps, I probably don’t need any tools.”

“It wouldn’t be impossible for me to go, too,” Neal, who had been quiet all this time, sounded unenthused about the prospect.

“It would be for me,” Setora said, “but I’m sure Kiichi could go. A nyaa might prove more useful than a human.”

Haruhiro looked at Hiyo. Hiyo returned his glance with a sharp look that seemed to say, *What? What is it? Do you want to die, punk?*

“...That works. Hiyo can go, too. I’ve been a thief before, after all.”

“Oh... You have?”

“I started as a paladin, had a brief stint as a thief, and ended up as a warrior. What of it?”

“A paladin...” Merry mumbled. Kuzaku’s jaw hung open.

“...A warrior? Seriously?”

“Th-That’s all in the past now. The past.” Hiyo blushed. What was she embarrassed about? “These days, I’m just an incredible beauty, as you can see. But I had a time in my life where I was those things. I hated it. Hiyo being a paladin, a thief, and a warrior? It’s not funny...”

Hiyo had probably been through a lot, but Haruhiro didn’t care. Any curiosity he might have had was being impeded by his visceral hatred of her.

“So you made this map twenty years ago, right?”

When Haruhiro asked, a terrible look crossed Hiyo’s face.

“Hiyo never said one word about making it, though?”

“...Well, it’s not like it matters.”

“Also, if you don’t call me Hiyo from here on out, you’re guaranteed to regret it.”

“Got it... Hiyo.”

“What is it, Haru-kun?”

Haruhiro closed his eyes. He took a deep breath. He was still frustrated, but it helped him calm down a little. That wasn’t anything to get so mad about. He realized as much when he thought about it with a clear head, but he was still pissed.

Hiyo was a genius when it came to harassing people. Haruhiro was being really careful, but even so, he was having a hard time dealing with her.

“...Is it the experience that comes with age?” he mumbled to himself, and Hiyo glared at him.

“Did you just say somethiiiiing?”

“Who knows. I don’t think I did. Did you hear something? Maybe you imagined it?”

“Hmph!” Hiyo looked to the side.

At a glance, Hiyo looked like a girl in her mid to late teens. But only at a glance. If you looked at her build, her clothing, and her hairstyle, you might think she was only that old. On closer inspection, it was clear she was older. He remembered what Barbara-sensei had said about her. The woman who likes to act younger than she is. There was no way she was in her teens. She looked like she was in her twenties. And mid, not early. Maybe even late. If you were looking in the right places, she could have been even older than that.

It might have been appropriate to say that she was “of indeterminate age.” The shape of her face, the way she applied makeup, her outfit, her build, her intonation, her choice of words, her gestures, none of it fit together. None of them felt like they were part of this person named Hiyo. It wasn’t natural. She was working pretty hard to be this way, wasn’t she? Playing the role of a person named Hiyo. If so, then why?

Haruhiro didn’t know. But wasn’t he obligated to learn more about Hiyo, even if he didn’t personally want to?

Hiyo was no friend of theirs. Frankly, it was fair to call her an enemy.

Without thorough knowledge of his opponent, he couldn’t put himself at an advantage. Yes. This was a battle. But what kind of battle? Haruhiro wasn’t even sure of that.

He couldn’t leave things as they were. If he didn’t seriously, earnestly, put everything he had into this, Hiyo, the Master of the Forbidden Tower, and General Jin Mogis would use him up, then throw him away.

“If the map is twenty years old, we shouldn’t rely on it. I guess we should start with me, Kiichi, Neal, and Hiyo entering the New City, and confirming the locations of Ohdongo and Ahsvasin, while verifying how much the current situation differs from what’s on the map. Hopefully even one of those bases still exists. Let’s check that, too.”

“Looks like we’ll have to wait here for now...” Kuzaku furrowed his brow in consternation. He looked super disappointed.

“Aren’t there any holes we could slip through?” Neal asked Hiyo.

“Doubt it. The security around the New City wasn’t nearly so tight back then...” Hiyo muttered to herself, then suddenly panicked. “H-H-Hiyo wouldn’t know anything about that, though! Not about twenty years ago! No way, okay! I j-j-just heard rumors! Rumors!”

“Huh?!” Kuzaku covered his mouth with his hands. “Wait, the great party that made this map twenty years ago, it was yours?! How old are you anyway?!”

“...Could you be any slower on the uptake?”

Setora made no attempt to hide the contempt in the look she gave Kuzaku. Merry’s eyes were equally cold.

“I don’t know that you should be asking her age...”

“No, but seriously, isn’t it a mystery? Huh? Is it just me? No way...?”

Hiyo suddenly stabbed the knife down on the map.

“You want to know thaaaat bad?”

She was smiling.

But it didn’t reach her eyes. The corners of her mouth were turned up, maybe even a little too far, but it still didn’t look one bit like she was smiling.

“I’ll tell you. I’m sixteen. Beauties never age. Hiyo is forever sixteen. Understood?”

Kuzaku nodded slightly.

“...Yes.”

Scary.

9. The Dead Ends of Heaven and the Valley

It was late into the night, but the walls of the New City were the same as ever. Light leaked from the watchtowers, and torches flickered as they moved back and forth along the top of the fortification.

Haruhiro was hiding in the shadow of a ruin that was not even ten meters away from the wall. After considering many options, this was the best one he could find.

The reason for that was simple and obvious: The distance between the watchtowers was wide here. Eyeballing it, it looked to be around sixty meters. The others were generally thirty to forty meters apart, so the difference was noticeable.

Unlike just after sunset, the goblin patrols were starting to get lax in their work. He'd confirmed that. There were still two goblins to a patrol, but once one patrol passed by, he could easily count to two hundred before the next group.

He had Kuzaku strip out of his armor, taking care not to make any noise. His large katana would be left with Setora.

Merry gently placed her hand on Haruhiro's shoulder. It was too dark to make out the expression on her face.

"Be careful," she said.

Haruhiro nodded in response.

He'd thought of any number of ways this could go wrong. Ways to avoid them. Ways to deal with it if he couldn't avoid them. Whenever he started thinking, he couldn't stop. Obviously, he was feeling tense. And uneasy. He couldn't possibly not.

No matter how much he thought, there was no end to it. His misgivings would never completely vanish. Honestly, he figured that was just how things were. It was impossible for everything to go according to plan. In fact, most things went

badly. It all balanced on a razor's edge, so it was natural he'd feel uneasy. Stability and peace of mind were far beyond his reach. The ground under his feet was always shifting. All he could do was try to keep his balance, and stay on his feet.

Whew, he exhaled.

Kiichi, who had been lying at Setora's feet, walked over to him. He stood up on his hind legs, and put his forepaw on Haruhiro's thigh.

"Nya," he meowed quietly. That presumably meant something like, *It's good to be working with you*. The feeling was more than mutual. Kiichi was way more trustworthy than Hiyo or Neal.

"We'll do this just like we planned. Kiichi and I cross the wall first. Then Hiyo and Neal, in that order."

"Okie-dokie."

"Sure."

"If there's a problem, I'll let you know, so stop immediately and pull out. You don't need to worry about me. I'll figure something out on my own. Okay, let's get started."

Wait for a goblin patrol to reach our entry point. I'm good at waiting. If it was all I had to do, I could do it forever. But things aren't going to be that easy.

The patrol's passed the entry point. How long until the next one? Less than two hundred seconds? I'd say it'll be about a hundred and eighty. Should we wait for the next one? No, that's enough time.

The previous patrol is still near the entry point.

We wait eighty seconds, then execute the plan. Cross the wall in twenty. That leaves eighty seconds to spare. Let's do it.

After counting to sixty, Haruhiro started to think, *The last patrol's a good distance away now. Maybe we're good to go?*

I'm being impatient, he realized. *I need to settle down.*

Sixty-seven, sixty-eight.

Sixty-nine.

Seventy.

Seventy-one. Seventy-two. Seventy-three.

Seventy-four.

Haruhiro raised his right hand. Five seconds to go.

He bent his fingers one by one.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

He moved quickly. Kiichi and Kuzaku followed in silence. Hiyo and Neal came, too.

They reached the wall.

Kuzaku put both hands on it.

Kiichi scampered up Kuzaku's body and was on top of the wall in no time. Next it was Haruhiro's turn.

Kuzaku turned toward him and crouched a little, putting his hands together a little above his knee. His palms were facing down, not up.

Haruhiro put his foot on Kuzaku's hands. He grabbed on to Kuzaku's shoulders.

"Ngh...!"

Kuzaku stretched his whole body as he pushed Haruhiro upward. The sheer dumb strength he possessed was incredible. Kuzaku raised his hands above his own head in one quick motion. He was probably standing on his tiptoes, too. Kuzaku was close to 190 centimeters tall, so it was like Haruhiro was standing on two-meter stilts. The wall was less than four meters high. It would be a simple matter for him to clamber over it now.

Kiichi was waiting on top of the wall. Below, Hiyo was having Kuzaku help her

climb. Haruhiro reached down and held out his hand to her. She grabbed his arm, and he quickly pulled her up.

“Thanks,” Hiyo whispered in his ear. Haruhiro ignored her.

Next it was Neal’s turn. Kuzaku pushed Neal up. He was helping Neal climb up onto the wall, just like he had Haruhiro and Hiyo.

Kuzaku waved. Haruhiro gave him a sign that meant, *Get going*. Kuzaku moved away from the wall.

The next patrol isn’t coming yet. We’re fine. We have time.

Kiichi jumped down from the wall first. He landed almost without a sound. It was maybe a three-meter fall here. Not as tall as on the Old City side.

Neal followed. It wasn’t as easy for him as Kiichi. He grabbed the upper edge of the wall, hung down from it, and then dropped.

“Ngh...!”

It wasn’t just that grunt. He made a lot of noise, too. But what about the patrol? Did they notice?

“That old man...” Hiyo muttered, then climbed down the wall. She executed her landing better than Neal.

What about the patrol? We’re good.

Haruhiro dropped down the other side of the wall, too. He pressed the bottom of his foot against the wall a number of times, without kicking, to kill his momentum. On landing, he loosened his body as much as he could and rolled across the ground. Then he got right back up, and kept moving.

He had heard as much as he could about the New City from Hiyo. The spot where they had landed — in other words, what Haruhiro was moving across right now — seemed like the ground, but it was not. It was a roof over a road. The roads of the New City were generally covered tunnels, and they had ceilings.

However, there were a ton of holes in them for the purpose of ventilation, and to let in light. Some were small, and others were large. They came in all sorts of shapes, too. The group used one of them to get down to the actual

road.

“...It’s a tight fit,” Neal muttered. “My back’s gonna ache later...”

It was true, the road was roughly a meter and a half across, with the ceiling only about that high, too. Even Hiyo, who was shorter than Haruhiro and Neal, had to duck her head.

“If you keep complaining, I *will* kill you, you know?” Hiyo was making an awfully direct threat. She must have been feeling the pressure. “If you flap your gums like that again, you’re dead, okay? Oh, and if you get separated from us, you won’t be making it home alive, either. Hiyo won’t have to kill you, you’ll just die. Anyway, you do what Hiyo tells you. If you don’t, I’ll kill you.”

“...Got it.”

“Let’s go.” Haruhiro urged the other two, then continued down the tunnel.

He didn’t sense the goblins. They were a race that woke in the morning, and slept at night, just like humans. He’d learned that much in Alterna. Most of the goblins were probably in bed, dreaming.

Some of the tunnels were wider, and had high ceilings. These had lighting fixtures here and there, made of ceramic, or something similar. But in those tunnels, there were always groups of gobs chatting along the side of the road, making it nearly impossible to pass.

That meant they were forced into tunnels they had to duck their heads in. He wasn’t going to complain like Neal, but Haruhiro’s back was starting to hurt, too. It also didn’t help that the tunnels were incredibly twisty, and played havoc with his sense of direction. But they didn’t just twist around, they were a complex maze. With all the T-junctions and crossroads, he didn’t even know what was going on anymore. Every so often, a gob would walk along. *Should I kill it?* Haruhiro wondered. But if he did, what would he do with the body? There was no way to hide it, so he’d have to leave it there. When morning came, and the other gobs found it, there would be an uproar. Ultimately, whenever a gob approached, they had to turn back and wait for it to pass them by.

I can’t see where we’re going. I feel like this is breaking me.

But at the same time, I probably won't break, he thought.

He didn't have his memories, so it was hard to have any real sense of this, but Haruhiro had apparently crossed this emotional tightrope many times before. If he was still looking at himself objectively and thinking things like, *I can't see where we're going. I feel like this is breaking me,* then he was still fine.

Now, if instead of not being able to see where he was going, he could only see a very limited distance in front of him, and lost sight of the situation he was in and his own mental state, that would be a sign he was in serious trouble.

Maybe he had developed the habit of examining himself objectively in order to avoid that ever happening.

The way that Neal repeatedly shook his head, as if to say, *I've had enough,* and let out silent sighs was probably his way of letting off steam and trying to get through this. Meanwhile Hiyo, who had volunteered herself to be their guide, stayed focused on her work, trying not to think about unnecessary things. Though they were all different, each of them had their own method for managing their stress.

According to Hiyo, twenty years ago a bunch of buildings that looked like mud dumplings had been plopped down at random, with tunnels dug between them. There were just two of the wide tunnels with high ceilings that served as main streets. Both started at Ahsvasin, and one of the two led to Ohdongo, the Deepest Valley. This was all recorded on the map.

Twenty years had completely changed the city. There were wide streets all over, and a lot of solid buildings much too well made to be mocked as mud dumplings, as Hiyo had before.

The only thing they were able to confirm before the sun came up was the location of Ahsvasin. No matter what hole they used to get up onto the ceiling of the roads, they could almost always see its splendor.

You could say it looked like a five-armed colossus. There were countless holes in the structure, and light poured out of them, so they could vaguely make out its shape. According to Hiyo, twenty years ago Ahsvasin was two-thirds its current height, and only had two of those arms, so they must have built more onto it.

Ahsvasin was supposed to be in roughly the center of the New City, so they could more or less guess where Ohdongo was. However, reaching it through the complex tunnels was going to be difficult. How about walking over the ceilings? The sun might rise before they made it there.

Not seeing any other option, the group decided to leave the New City temporarily. Inside the walls, there were stairs leading up to the walkway everywhere. These weren't guarded, so they just needed to watch out for patrols. Getting into the New City was hard, but leaving was easy.

When they got back to the ruin, the way Kuzaku greeted Haruhiro, wagging his tail, was insufferable. Uh, obviously Kuzaku didn't have an actual tail, like Kiichi did, but he was just that exuberant. Haruhiro really wished he'd tone it down a bit. Though, if he was mean about it, Kuzaku would just get depressed. That was a little painful in its own way. But only a little.

"It doesn't seem realistic to try and lie low inside the New City as we keep exploring it."

What Neal said was probably right. For now, at least, they'd have to commute into the New City from this ruin in the Old City. Hiyo seemed less than satisfied with that.

"Let's just hope the goblins in the New City don't make a move while we're taking our time."

The goblins prized hi'irogane. If that was true, they might attack and try to take back the arms and equipment that Viceroy Bogg and his minions had been carrying.

They waited for night, and then Haruhiro, Hiyo, Neal, and Kiichi infiltrated the New City once more. Their goal was to find the route from the Highest Heaven, Ahsvasin, to the Deepest Valley, Ohdongo.

Because the tunnels were so labyrinthine, they moved around over the roofs of the tunnel roads. But those roofs were full of holes. They had to be careful not to trip or fall through them. There were sometimes passages over the tunnel roads to directly connect buildings to each other. Those sorts of passages tended to be in use at all hours, so they couldn't let their guards down. Obviously, there were goblins living in the buildings that jutted out above the

tunnel roads, so if they raised their voices carelessly, they might be overheard. They might be spotted by a goblin who happened to be looking out a window, too.

They found out that the area near Ahsvasin, which was where the Mogado was supposed to live, had an awful lot of large buildings. Ahsvasin was completely surrounded by them. It didn't seem possible to approach it over the tunnel roofs.

At least one of the wide main streets with the high ceilings seemed to go through to Ahsvasin. However, the main street seemed to be a thriving business district. It was brightly lit, and full of rowdy goblins at all hours. It would be difficult to take the main street to Ahsvasin. No, more like impossible.

That was as far as their second day of exploration took them. On the third day, they headed for Ohdongo. They didn't think the location had changed in the last twenty years, so they just had to travel over the roofs of the tunnel roads.

Haruhiro had gotten used to exploring the New City. That was exactly why he had to remain careful, and warn himself not to get complacent. He didn't have to explain that to the others. Hiyo, Neal, and even Kiichi already knew.

They managed to reach Ohdongo even more easily than he'd expected.

Or the area outside of it, to be more precise.

It stood in stark contrast to Ahsvasin. The area around it might not have been empty, but it was close.

The Deepest Valley.

This was less a valley, and more of a vertical shaft. There was a roughly circular plaza, probably two hundred meters across, but it had a hole at its center with a diameter of about a hundred and fifty meters.

The tunnel roads all stopped at the plaza, and there were countless watch fires lit around the edge of the hole. The goblins walking around the plaza carried spears and shields, and they had what looked like crossbows strapped to their backs. These were undoubtedly guards. They spotted one goblin with a red spear, wearing a red helmet, too. If it was carrying hi'irogane equipment, it

was possible that this was the goblin in charge of security.

The group descended from the tunnel road roofs, got as close to the plaza as they could manage, and tried to climb up on top of a building that would give them a full view of Ohdonggo. Was it possible to race across the plaza and into the hole? And if they did, what then?

There were seventy to eighty guard gobs lurking around the plaza. Could they get through without being noticed by them? If it were just Haruhiro and Kiichi, then maybe, just maybe. But Hiyo and Neal made things more difficult.

Ohdonggo wasn't just a hole in the ground. There was a spiral staircase around the inside of it. How far did the stairs go? What were things like down at the bottom? He couldn't tell. But those were probably guard gobs carrying torches, or whatever they were, as they went up and down the stairs.

Even if they made it across the plaza to Ohdonggo, there was no way to avoid the guard gobs on the stairs. They'd have to race down to the bottom, eliminating the guards as they went, and try to find an ugoth.

That would be one hell of a gamble.

And the odds were not in their favor.

The group turned back. They had to leave the New City before dawn broke.

As they were walking over the roofs of the tunnel roads, Neal muttered, "Well, this is a first."

There didn't seem to be any way forward. There was nothing they could do. Even if they kept at it as long as they could, it didn't feel like they would ever come up with an idea.

If this were a card game, they had been dealt an unwinnable hand, one with no potential in it at all, and just couldn't figure out what to do about it.

There were two options.

Lose, or fold.

But for a variety of reasons, they couldn't choose either.

"There's still something we can do."

That was all Hiyo said before crossing the wall.

Is she just being a sore loser? Haruhiro thought at the time.

But, actually, he might have been happier if that was all it had been.

10. The Two Kings

This is a story from long, long ago.

There's a certain "myth."

Yes, this is purely a myth...

It may contain some truths, or the seeds of them, but it can't be exactly what happened.

Think of it as a story that people wanted to believe in, or at least believed in up until a certain point.

Long, long, long ago, there was a land named Arabankia.

In terms of what Arabankia was, it's been said to be an island floating in a vast lake; a continent sunk beneath a great flood; a place far to the west, beyond the red sea; or perhaps a green paradise, spreading out on the other side of the frozen lands of the north.

There are many stories, you see. Nobody has any way of knowing what's right.

Setting that all aside, the legend that there was once a land named Arabankia has been told in Grimgar since ancient times.

Arabankia was a temperate land, never too cold, or too hot. The verdant forests were filled with birds and beasts, and the wind sang across vast plains that stretched out endlessly. Grimgar was laid to waste in the terrifying battle of the gods, but Arabankia alone was always peaceful.

One day, a certain family moved to Arabankia.

The father was named George, and he had three sons: Theodore, Ishmahr, and Nahnanka. He had a number of daughters, too, but their names are long forgotten, washed away in the flow of time. Their mother apparently died soon after the family arrived in Arabankia. When they buried her in the soil of that land, a great tree arose before their eyes; flowers bloomed on it, and eventually

turned into fruit. They also say that this tree collapsed to become the Kuaron Mountains, but that's another story, and not that important right now, so let's not get into it.

George and the three brothers worked together in the land of Arabankia and lived in harmony. Well, actually, the climate was temperate, the occasional rain showers felt warm on the skin, there were endless beasts to hunt, all the fruit in the world to pick, limitless clean water in the streams, and even springs of alcohol if they went looking, so they didn't have a single trouble.

Arabankia was so idyllic it seemed like a lie, or a joke.

The family spent most of their time fooling around.

However, at some point the youngest son, Nahnanka, realized a mysterious thing.

"We've lived here for quite a long time, but how long has it actually been? None of you seem to have aged in the slightest. Is that possible?"

"Now that you mention it, you could be right." The second son, Ishmahr, was carefree. "But, even if that's true, well, what's the harm? It means we can live in peace and quiet forever."

However, the eldest son, Theodore, was of a different opinion.

"I wonder about that. Perhaps we're living in a dream. We think we all reached Arabankia, tragically lost our mother, and buried her together, but is it true? Isn't all of this just a dream?"

"Mother's tree is right there, isn't it?" Ishmahr pointed to the great tree. "This isn't a dream. You say the strangest things."

"What did you say?!"

Theodore got angry. He and Ishmahr quarreled like this occasionally.

"Wait, wait, children. You mustn't fight," their father, George, chided them in a dignified tone of voice. "I don't think this is a dream, like Theodore was saying, but it is odd that none of us have aged. Because you're such good sons, always fetching food for me, I do nothing but eat and sleep, then eat and sleep again, and yet I haven't gained any weight. That's strange, too, now that I bring

it up.”

“I’m going to go on a little trip and see what things are like outside,” the youngest son, Nahnanka, said. Nobody stopped him, and so Nahnanka left on his journey immediately.

The family continued their carefree life in Arabankia, but no matter how much time passed, Nahnanka did not return. The oldest brother, Theodore, grew worried.

“I think I’ll go search for Nahnanka.”

“No, you stay here, Brother. I’ll go for you.”

This was how Ishmahr came to leave Arabankia, too.

With two of his sons gone, and no sign of their return, their father, George, could wait no longer. But, oh, get this. This is one of those parts that makes you realize this story is a myth, but after all the time the father had spent doing nothing but eat and sleep in Arabankia, he could no longer move away. It was as if he had put down roots.

Like their dead mother, George turned into a great tree.

In one theory, they say that the father gorged himself while fretting over the safety of his boys, and was buried by Theodore after he died of food poisoning.

Whatever the case, the eldest, Theodore, was left with no choice but to go in search of his little brothers.

Well, he had little sisters who were even younger, and there are some fascinating and incestuous stories about the things he did with them, but it would take too long to get into that, so let’s not.

Theodore was quite partial to his life in paradise, so in order to quell his lingering affection for the place, he repeatedly told himself not to look back. He must have had some sense that he’d never return. He was right.

He walked for some time before thinking, *It should be fine now*. When he turned to look back, there was a milky white haze hanging in the air, and he couldn’t see anything. And, hey, wasn’t that haze rushing towards him? Dunno what’s up with that, but Theodore was in serious danger.

Run, run, Theodore. This is no time to dawdle. Run like the wind. Go. Keep moving forward.

Theodore raced for days and days. Okay, sure, that seems like it would kill him, but he's a character in a myth, so he could pull this kind of thing off. When he reached the edge of a lake, he decided to stop and rest.

That lake, surrounded by the Rinstorm, Dioze, and Kurogane Mountains, was so incredibly beautiful that it stole Theodore's heart. You might think, "Hey, what about his brothers?" But this is a myth. Poking fun at this stuff would just be rude.

"High mountains, like the walls of a house. A lake more wonderful than any I knew in paradise. How could I not build a kingdom here? I will have to recruit workers. Let those who would live in my kingdom gather to me. I will become king, and name this country Arabakia."

Hey, it's not cool to say things like, "Oh, come on. That came out of nowhere," either. You're free to think it, but keep your mouth shut. A man by the lakeside shouts, "I'm gonna be king, and I'll let you be my peasants, so gather here." It's pretty surreal to imagine it, but for whatever reason, people responded to his call. They came from the north, west, and east, bowing before Theodore one after another, and pledging their allegiance. It is said that Theodore would bless each of their foreheads with his kiss, and pompously declare, "I recognize you as one of my people." This makes no sense to you? Yeah, that figures. But that's the myth, so live with it.

The myth of what, you ask? It's the origin myth of our Kingdom of Arabakia.

Theodore George, the one we call George I, created the Kingdom of Arabakia six hundred and sixty years ago now.

That's how the story is told.

Now, get this.

There are actually two George Is.

Huh?

Say what?

Yeah, you would think that, wouldn't you?

This gets just a wee bit complicated, so let's try to sum it up succinctly.

The truth is, the one who founded the Kingdom of Arabakia was not, in fact, Theodore George. It is possible that a man named Theodore existed, but he wasn't the first to name himself the King of Arabakia.

That story about the Kingdom of Arabakia being founded six hundred and sixty years ago is nonsense, too. Or there's no record of it, at least.

It happened one day about three hundred and sixty years ago.

This guy called Enad loudly declared, "Starting today I'm the king. You got a problem with that? Well, then bring it. I'll kill the lot of ya!"

At the time, hard as this is to imagine with all the human kingdoms gone now, there were apparently a lot of guys like Enad out there. Folks with the charisma to bring the people of an area together, along with connections and strength of arms. They called themselves kings but, well, they were more like gang bosses. The world was so chaotic that you couldn't sleep at night without the backing of a group of ruffians. That being the case, it's human nature that those ruffians would side with the toughest and most generous boss they could find.

Enad was the face of a certain town on the lakeside, and was fully established as the leader of a massive gang. Three centuries and a couple decades ago, he was living in an era where people in that sort of position were becoming kings one after another.

The incredible thing about Enad, and maybe he learned this from someone else, was the way that he set out to prove he wasn't just any old Enad.

Everyone knows the story about the paradise of Arabankia, right? Where George's son Theodore built a kingdom on the lake. That famous legend. The truth is, this is the town in that legend, and I, Enad, am descended from Theodore. I am Enad George, descendant of George's son Theodore, and I will name our kingdom Arabakia. How's that? Pretty sweet, huh?

The truth of the matter is, Enad was a capable man. He brought the nearby villages, towns, gangs, and their bosses under his control. The expansion of the Kingdom of Arabakia knew no limits.

But no matter where you go, you always have to watch out for threats from within. The Kingdom of Arabakia that had so rapidly expanded under Enad was, in some ways, an alliance of gangs. Some people followed him out of adoration, while others swore loyalty only because they couldn't fight against the big wave that he represented.

However, Enad must never have suspected that of all people, Ishidua Zaemoon, the king's right hand, the closest of his close associates, would be the one to betray him.

Maybe the king pushed him around too much. Maybe he couldn't stand to see the king grow more arrogant every time his stature rose. Or maybe he just wished the guy had shown some sympathy for his position, stuck between the king and those beneath him. Ishidua must have had his reasons, but there's no questioning that he sought to end Enad's life.

But Enad was no ordinary guy. This was a man who'd clawed his way to the top.

He was like, "Mrrgh! I smell bloodlust!" and detected the creeping assassin. He tried to go on the counterattack. But Ishidua was pretty impressive in his own right, and he reacted immediately. He sent pursuers to finish off Enad, who had fled for his life, but they say every one of them was struck down.

Nice one, Enad. You're awesome, Enad. You weren't just acting full of yourself, you were actually super strong, huh?

Now, it was plain as day that this incident was an act of treason by Ishidua Zaemoon. Yet many people had helped him, and there weren't many who had remained as bystanders. Maybe Enad really was especially bad about pushing his underlings around? Even if the people supported him, the members of his government seemed to hate his guts.

Ishidua and his fellow conspirators wanted Enad dead, no matter what it took. But as much as they wanted it, it seemed Enad had already fled outside the Kingdom of Arabakia. They say that he was on the verge of death, but the guy still had the skill to massacre everyone who'd gone after him. Even if they did manage to find him, how long would that take? With that in mind, Ishidua made a grand proclamation.

“Though it saddens us, our king has gone mad and run away. As his retainers, we have searched with all our power, but no matter what we do, we simply cannot seem to locate him. Because things cannot remain like this forever, I would like to have another ruler in his place. As you are all aware, King Enad George has no wife nor children, and yet he does have a distant relative. She, like King Enad, must be a descendant of the Kingdom of Arabakia’s founder, Theodore George. Let us have her become our queen, and come together to support her.”

Was the young girl, Fria, who ascended the throne truly a relative of Enad? You have to assume that was a fabrication, but Ishidua Zaemoon rapidly instituted a system where he would be supporting a queen who was descended from Theodore George as her regent. Queen Fria was a direct descendant of Theodore of the House of George, so she could carry on the House of the Founder.

Incidentally, Enad had a sworn brother by the name of Steech. Not a brother-in-law, a sworn brother. The two of them swore an oath of brotherhood, despite not being related by blood at all, so they must have been really close. Steech was Enad’s top flunky when he was a gang boss, but Enad had gradually alienated him. As more talented people like Ishidua Zaemoon joined him, Steech’s relative value dropped. Enad started to look at him and think, “You’re not actually that useful, huh?” Ishidua even called out to Steech and got his cooperation, then continued to treat him well after the revolution. He handled the situation nicely. Never missed a beat, you know? Ishidua Zaemoon. He was a man who could get things done.

Steech’s family held power in the north of the Kingdom, and at some point succeeded in suggesting that they, too, had some hint of the founder Theodore’s blood in their veins. They came to be called the House of the North. This was despite the fact that, obviously, since Steech was only Enad’s sworn brother, they had no connection to Theodore George whatsoever.

After that chaotic beginning, the Kingdom of Arabakia saw more cruel scheming, feuding, bloody power struggles, and internecine violence as they rose to become the greatest power in all of Grimgar.

There’s the House of the Founder and the House of the North repeatedly

assassinating each other's members; forbidden love between a young prince of the House of Ishidua and the daughter of its rival, the House of Mogis; the fall of the House of Mogis; the crisis caused by the scandalous deviancy of the head of the House of Vedoy; the House of Water, which was always receiving some windfall or another; and more. The history of the Kingdom of Arabakia has any number of amusing topics to discuss, but let's turn to the year 503 in the kingdom's calendar. That would be 157 years ago now, wouldn't it? In the Kingdom of Arabakia, and other states all over, there was a rash of bizarre incidents where hordes of moving corpses appeared and ran rampant. You see where we're going with this. That's right.

The infamous No-Life King appeared.

The dead rising and attacking the living was a crisis in itself. It really stirred up a hornet's nest of trouble, but it was the outrageous incident which followed in the year 505 that truly sent shock waves through the Kingdom of Arabakia.

Ishidua Rohro was a descendant of Ishidua Zaemoon, and an important vassal of the Kingdom of Arabakia. Because he was young and still unmarried, not a day passed without the ladies seeking his affection. However, this incredibly famous person vanished all of a sudden.

Or so people thought, then he popped back up at the palace, looking awfully pale.

"I am not who I was until yesterday. I urge you all to surrender. To he who was forsaken by death, and rules it. To he who is the King of Death, and the Undying King. Submit to my master, the No-Life King. Accept death, and I will guarantee you will live forever. Just like me."

Well, that caused quite the uproar. Things got out of hand. It was a real mess. In the chaos, the elite guards skewered and stabbed Ishidua Rohro with a whole 27 spears and swords, and yet he still didn't die.

"I take it that's your answer, is it? I will pass it on to my master."

Ishidua Rohro left the palace, dragging along the many swords and spears that were still stuck in him and bleeding dark blood. The very next day, the moving corpses that would come to be called the undead began a major offensive.

The undead didn't just attack the Kingdom of Arabakia. The other smaller human nations were affected, too. It's not like nobody tried to bring the kingdoms together to overcome the great crisis they all faced, but everyone had their hands full with their own problems, and they didn't like each other much to begin with, so it was kind of impossible. The elf and dwarf kingdoms, which had built up relatively good relations with the human race, were struggling with the undead attacks, too.

In the year 513 of the kingdom's calendar, responding to the call of the No-Life King, the orcs, goblins, and kobolds that had long been oppressed by the humans came together with the gray elves who had been estranged from the elves of the Shadow Forest, as well as the undead, obviously, to form the Alliance of Kings.

Setting the gray elves and orcs aside for the moment, the goblins and kobolds had never had a king before. When the No-Life King suggested that they might be better off with a king, that it would help to unite them as a race and increase their power, the goblins and kobolds accepted it.

As the leader of the Alliance of Kings, the No-Life King had five close associates, including Ishidua Rohro, called the five princes, but it is said that those five would kneel before the other kings as if they were their vassals, too. Though he was the head of the alliance, he took the position that the kings were equal. He was trying to lead by example and show that the undead, orcs, goblins, kobolds, and gray elves were all different, and all wonderful, so they should work to be the best they could be together.

The human kingdoms were at a total disadvantage. Powerful nations like Ishmar and Nananka, and small but robust states like Kuzen were destroyed one after another. The elves mostly shut themselves inside the Shadow Forest, hoping the calamity would pass them by. The bearded, barrel-like dwarves fought valiantly, but faced a series of defeats against superior numbers. It was all they could do to gather their strength in the Ironblood Kingdom of the Kurogane Mountains and harden their defenses.

The Kingdom of Arabakia had superior military and economic power to all of these countries. However, the reason that the Kingdom of Arabakia became the last bastion of the human race was not because of their vast domain, large

population, or powerful soldiers. It was simply that they were the farthest south. The No-Life King came from the north. The undead traveled southward, attacking humans, elves, and dwarves, constantly adding to their ranks. The King of Arabakia, the government officials, the generals, and the people all fled farther and farther south.

It was the year 521 of the kingdom's calendar, 139 years ago.

The southernmost city of the Kingdom of Arabakia, Damuro, fell.

King Gary, who ruled the Kingdom of Arabakia at the time, had snuck out of Damuro long before then. He evacuated south of the Tenryu Mountains through the Earth Dragon's Aorta Road.

They say that the head of the House of the North, Giske, who bore the blood of Enad George's sworn brother Steech, fought to the end, trying to let as many people escape as possible. There's theories that because King Gary was from the House of the Founder, and he had an intensely antagonistic relationship with Giske of the House of the North, he may have deliberately left him there, though.

Having brilliantly run for his life, and made it to the new lands to the south, King Gary and his people decided to take advantage of the fact that the House of the North had died out as an opportunity to rewrite history. As far as they were concerned, the story of how Enad George, who built the Kingdom of Arabakia, vanished after Ishidua Zaemoon sought his life, and the traitor put some girl named Friaui, a total nobody, on the throne so that he could control her... never happened.

The one who established the kingdom was the legendary Theodore George. He was the true founder and George I. The foundational myth of the kingdom became official history.

If you think about it, you could kind of say that it was that bloody first act of betrayal which turned the Kingdom of Arabakia into the scheming hell it became. We should let go of the past here, they probably thought. In these savage new lands, we need to come together.

Well, they must have been desperate in their own way.

If we interpret their actions in a positive light, that is.

11. Someday, That Debt Will Be Repaid with Interest

“Okay. That story’s gone on quite long enough. It’s about time we steeled ourselves and got down to business, wouldn’t you say?”

As Hiyo spoke, looking down at Haruhiro, she had a cloth wrapped around the lower half of her face. Thanks to that, it was hard to tell her expression. But he was pretty confident she was smirking.

“Well... I’d say I’m as steely as I’m going to get... I guess.”

Bright sunlight shone in through a hole in the ceiling just above the table where Haruhiro was lying down on his back. It made him feel weird.

He was naked from the waist up, for one thing.

The table was one that Kuzaku had found in the ruins and brought here. It had a clean sheet thrown over it, and now Haruhiro was half-naked on top of it. He didn’t know how to describe how strange this felt.

“Okay.”

There was another table, or a chair rather, next to where Hiyo was standing. The chair had a white cloth over it, too. Sitting on that was a knife that had been sterilized with boiling water, and an object that looked like a flower bud that was maybe three centimeters across.

“Let’s get this show on the road, then.”

Hiyo grabbed the knife with her right hand, holding it up to look at the end of the blade. She tested its edge with her left index finger.

“Nyeheheheh...”

She wasn’t just smirking, she was laughing out loud.

He was tempted to say, *Oh, come on*, but Hiyo quickly withdrew her finger.

“Whoopsie. I shouldn’t touch it after going to all the trouble of disinfecting it.”

“...If we’re doing this, can you just get it over with? I’m getting tired here.”

“Any final words?”

Hiyo was clearly enjoying this. He wasn't going to give her any more satisfaction.

“Nope.”

“Is that a fact?”

Hiyo looked unamused.

“Then, please roll over onto your side.”

Haruhiro did as he was told and turned over so that his right side was facing up. When he did, he saw Kuzaku by the wall, looking at him worriedly. Merry and Setora were close by the warrior's side. Kiichi and Neal were outside the ruin, standing guard in case anything happened.

“...Hold on,” Kuzaku said through quivering lips. “I just can't... I can't accept this, you know? Does Haruhiro really have to be the one to do this? Can't someone else? Like the old man, maybe?”

The “old man” was Neal, of course.

“No one else will do,” Hiyo said with a nasal laugh. “Neal-san does seem like a capable scout, sure. And Hiyo can do thief-y stuff, too. Not to overstate this and make him think I'm trying to butter him up or something, but Haru-kun is head and shoulders above both of us.”

“...Um, could you not call me Haru-kun?”

Haruhiro tried objecting, just to see if it would work.

“*Haru-kun*,” Hiyo deliberately emphasized his name, “is quite the thief, you know? Oh, yes, Haru-kun is.”

I shouldn't have opened my mouth.

“Oh, a thief with Haru-kun's skills is just what we need. Haru-kun is the one. It has to be Haru-kun. Therefore, we'll have Haru-kun do it. All right, you're ready now, aren't you, Haru-kun?”

Before responding, Haruhiro looked at Kuzaku. Why were his eyes a little misty?

I wish he wouldn't look at me like that.

Kuzaku's brow was furrowed, his lips drawn taut, and he had the most pathetic look on his face.

I really wish he'd cut it out.

"Ultimately, I decided for myself that I'd do this. I can't say, 'Believe in me,' or anything bigheaded like that, but it's kind of unnerving when you guys look that worried."

"...It is, isn't it?" Kuzaku's shoulders slumped. "Sorry, man. I know this goes without saying, but I believe in you. I just can't help feeling like we're falling for her plan, and I don't like it."

Hiyo got miffed, and spun the knife around.

"You make it sound like Hiyo's some kind of evil strategist. Hiyo's just brainy, you know? Deep down, she's a good person, okay?"

"...A good person?" Merry muttered.

Setora sighed.

"How about you stop running your mouth, and get this over with quickly?"

"Oh, I'll do it. You don't have to tell me. I already said I would, you little bitch."

Hiyo placed her left hand on Haruhiro's hip. The knife in her right hand flashed dully. It couldn't possibly do that on its own. Was it reflecting the sunlight from the hole in the ceiling?

What am I supposed to do at a time like this? Haruhiro wondered. Was it better to watch? Or should he look away? Could he shut his eyes until it was over?

His heart was racing like mad. His breathing was shallow, too.

Hiyo took a deep breath.

Well, this is just a vague feeling I have, but I should probably watch.

"Here it comes."

“Go ahead, whenever you’re ready.”

Even he thought that was kind of an awkward response. Hiyo laughed a little, then smoothly inserted the knife into Haruhiro’s right flank.

There was a small slicing sound, but it felt more hot than painful.

No. Wait. Yeah, it hurts. It does hurt. Ow.

Haruhiro gritted his teeth.

Ohhhh. Damn, this hurts.

He was sweating. Buckets. He wanted to thrash around. But he wouldn’t. He had to stay put.

“I’m gonna cut a little more.”

This time, it was all he could do to nod. Hiyo’s knife entered through the wound, and jerked around. Okay, maybe she wasn’t jerking it around, but he had to imagine it was about that bad.

It hurts. But I can take it, I guess. I can handle this.

“Sorry, it’s gonna be another centimeter... Two centimeters.”

Yeah, no, I didn’t need that. Don’t explain it to me. I don’t need the rundown, just get it over with. I don’t care anymore. Cut whatever skin, or meat, or whatever else, you want.

“I’m trying not to damage the muscle, see? I think there’s subcutaneous fat here. Probably, at least. So, it’s fine, juuust fine.”

Like I said, I don’t need that. You don’t have to say it. I don’t want the running commentary.

“There!”

“...Guh!”

“Whoo!”

“...Ohhhh!”

“Nyan, nyan, nyah!”

“...Nnnngh!”

“Almost there! Almost there! Hah!”

“...Y-You’re doing this intentionally, aren’t you?”

“Oh, heavens no. Gosh. I think you’re projecting a bit. Alrighty then, we’re almost done. It’s tiiiime to implant the relic. Merry-chan, are you ready?”

“Yes. Any time. Hurry up.”

“Then here it coooomes!”

Hiyo set down the knife, and picked up the bud-like object instead. He was getting used to the pain from having been opened up with a knife, but this was going to be something else. Haruhiro clenched his teeth in advance, and braced himself.

“And in it gooooes!”

Hiyo twisted the bud-like object inside Haruhiro.

This is it.

“Afuh...!”

Haruhiro let out a weird gasp.

It sounded sad, heart-wrenching. Like he wanted to cry. This was a pretty nasty kind of pain.

“It’s in! It’s inside him now! Have at it, Merry-chan!”

“O light! May Lumiaris’ divine protection be upon you...”

Merry rushed over, and shoved Hiyo aside. He just had to endure a little longer.

Merry. Merry-sama.

He felt like worshiping her now.

“Sacrament!”

It was like a miracle. As the blinding light enveloped him in an instant, the pain faded, and he felt the tension slip away as his body relaxed.

“Haru...!”

By the time he noticed her moving closer, Merry had practically leapt onto him.

“Are you okay? It doesn’t hurt anymore? Haru? How are you?”

“...Oh, uh, s-sure... I’m good.”

“Thank goodness...”

Yeah. Let’s go with “good” for now.

Haruhiro was as glad as she was, but it wasn’t good for her to hug him like this. He was half-naked for one thing. And, oh yeah, that’s right...

“...You’ll get blood on you, Merry.”

“Ohh.”

For a moment, Merry looked concerned by that. But she apparently didn’t care about her own clothing getting dirty. She grabbed the corner of the cloth that was covering the table, and used it to start wiping down Haruhiro’s body.

“The wounds have all closed up properly. Does anything feel wrong? That’s a pretty big object inside you.”

“...Not really. As long as I don’t touch it, I barely notice it’s there.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“Hey, noooooow!” Hiyo interrupted them. Her voice was filled with malice. It was like she was trying to fill it with every negative emotion possible at the same time. Not only was she squinting, her whole face was scrunched up.

“Enough with the public display of affection, okay? Also, we’re not in a rush here. Cure would have done just fine, but no, you had to go and bust out Sacrament. Are you trying to show off?”

“Th-That’s not what I...!”

Merry slowly moved away from Haruhiro.

Thanks to that, he was able to catch his breath. When someone of the opposite sex was that close to him, it wasn’t unpleasant, it was the opposite, actually, but it still made it hard to calm down. Maybe this varied from person to person, but even if it was someone of the same gender, like Kuzaku, Haruhiro

would have a hard time relaxing when they had their hands all over him.

When Haruhiro sat up, Kuzaku brought him his clothes.

“Here!”

Look at him.

Why is he grinning like that?

But if Haruhiro told him he didn’t like it, Kuzaku would get depressed again.

I know he doesn’t mean any harm. I’ll put up with it. It’s not hard.

Before taking the clothes and getting dressed, Haruhiro tried touching his right flank. The area around the relic was slightly swollen, but it felt more irritating than painful. It made him want to cut it out as soon as possible.

“Well, if this is as bad as it gets...”

Obviously, this had been Hiyo’s idea. The plan made use of a relic, so the rest of them never could have thought of it.

Though, even if they’d had the relic in their possession, it was questionable whether it would have occurred to him. Even if it had crossed his mind, he still might have thought, *No way. Not a chance. I couldn’t do that*, and dismissed it outright.

Haruhiro put on his clothes and got down from the table.

“Well, give it your best shot, okay?” Hiyo clapped him on the shoulder. He wanted to punch her, but decided to hold off for now, and ignored it.

For the moment, they were working together. Out of necessity. This relationship wouldn’t go on forever.

When the time came, he was going to make Hiyo pay.

The more she hurt them and made them suffer, the higher the price was going to be.

12. At the End of That Gaze

Kuzaku put his back against the wall of the New City, bending his knees and putting his hands together. Kiichi used Kuzaku's shoulders and head as stepping stones as he clambered up the wall. Haruhiro put his right foot in Kuzaku's hands. Kuzaku rapidly boosted him up.

They crossed the wall into the New City by night, and proceeded along the ceilings of the tunnel roads. Kiichi was in his element. He easily bounded over the holes in the roofs as he led the way, sometimes speedily climbing a building to look around, and at other times trailing behind to watch the rear. Haruhiro didn't even have to give orders. Kiichi was a really clever nyaa. It helped that Haruhiro didn't have to talk to him. Haruhiro preferred to keep quiet as much as possible. Not that he hated people, or anything like that.

They were heading to Ahsvasin.

They tried getting down onto the street they believed led there, but as one might expect, there was a lot of goblin traffic there. Even if he used Stealth, it wasn't clear he could make it through.

Haruhiro and Kiichi returned to the ceiling of the tunnel road. The buildings around Ahsvasin towered over them like cliffs when they approached. Every one of them was full of holes, which was to say windows, and they were all shaped differently. That limited the number of walls it was possible to scale.

He took a risk, and tried going in one of the windows. The layout was pretty complex. Some of the rooms had a door, while others didn't. Sometimes, there were gobs sleeping in beds that looked like piles of dirt in the middle of a corridor.

Kiichi took off at some point, but Haruhiro didn't worry about him. While he was exploring the building, the nyaa came back. Kiichi turned back towards the direction he had come from, and wagged his tail slightly. Haruhiro interpreted that as a request to follow.

Following Kiichi, he came to a room that felt like a cellar despite not being underground. There were pots, large and small, arranged in lines and piles within. *What's this?* he wondered. There was a not quite pungent, but unique, stench filling the room. It smelled both moldy and sweet.

He opened one pot, and it was filled with what he could only assume was a mass of mold, stinking a hundred times worse than what he'd already been exposed to. He hurriedly closed the lid, but his sense of smell wasn't going to recover for quite a while.

There were a number of windows at the top of the cellar room. It would be daybreak soon.

This was likely a storehouse. Was the stuff inside of the pot food? Did they eat it? If it was fermented, that seemed possible.

Haruhiro decided to hide in the back of the storehouse and wait for night. He sensed gobs occasionally, but though they passed by the storehouse, they never entered. Kiichi slept curled into a ball at Haruhiro's feet. If Kiichi, who had senses many times more sensitive than a human's, could sleep here, then it had to be safe. But Haruhiro couldn't let his guard down. Still, if he strained himself too much, he wouldn't last. He needed to maintain his focus while resting. Turn his attention to the things that mattered. He had his back to the wall, and was halfway to nodding off, but he didn't miss the slightest noise.

Kiichi occasionally woke up, and left the storehouse.

Haruhiro stood up once in a while to stretch. He ate his portable rations twice, sharing with Kiichi.

The sun set, and the gobs went to bed. Haruhiro and Kiichi left the storehouse.

Kiichi had been walking around the building during the day, so he had a good grasp of the layout. With the nyaa guiding him, Haruhiro was able to find the exit, but there were gobs there so he didn't approach. He also figured out why the design felt complex to him. Maybe it was a unique feature of this building, but it had no stairs. Because of that, there was no clear distinction between the first floor, second floor, third floor, and so on. Each room varied in size and ceiling height, and most of the corridors were sloped. No stairs anywhere to be

seen. Higher rooms were connected to lower rooms with holes, and there were sometimes ropes hanging through them.

Haruhiro decided to keep moving higher and higher. He had to be careful of gobs as he went, so there was no shortage of cases where he had to detour around them. It took time. But slowly, without rushing, he worked his way upward. Ever upward.



He couldn't seem to go any higher. He searched for a window, and went out through it.

He was maybe fourteen to fifteen meters up. The wind was pretty strong. That made his legs feel a little weak. Kiichi smoothly climbed the wall. Had they made it to the top? The spot where Kiichi was now would probably be the highest point on this building.

Oh. It looked like Kiichi had been showing Haruhiro a route he could use, too. Haruhiro gave it a try, and though it didn't work quite as well for him as it had for Kiichi, he managed to get up on the roof too.

The roof wasn't flat. It was sort of like the shape you'd get if you tried to flatten a dumpling. There weren't any outcroppings at the edge, so if he slipped that would be the end of him. Haruhiro cautiously knelt as he looked up at Ahsvasin, the Highest Heaven. It towered over this building. Had to be over thirty meters tall. One of the five arm-like structures growing out of it extended over the building Haruhiro and Kiichi now stood on.

"It's huge...!"

He spoke aloud for the first time in a while. Kiichi nuzzled his head against Haruhiro's knee. Haruhiro gave him a pat, and he narrowed his eyes happily.

"Sorry to make you come along. I think I'd have felt pretty hopeless by myself. You really helped me by being here."

As if to say "Don't worry about it," Kiichi let out a short meow.

Haruhiro took several deep breaths.

Okay. Let's go.

Haruhiro started descending from the roof. On the opposite side from the direction he'd come. The side facing Ahsvasin. Just as when he had climbed up, there weren't many places he could climb down, either. He was forced to drop from window to window. If he couldn't get down from where he was, he would go in through the window temporarily.

He'd have felt hopeless by himself. No, it would have been far worse than that. Without Kiichi's assistance, this would have taken many times longer. And

even then, he still might not have been able to make as much progress.

When the sky started to brighten, he was almost down to ground level. Kiichi had checked that the coast was clear, so Haruhiro went in through the window. He squinted in the direction of Ahsvasin.

I didn't expect it to look like that.

The area surrounded by massive structures must have been the grounds of Ahsvasin. It was flat land with fences, walls, and a tunnel road leading into the structure. Or at least, that was what Haruhiro thought it would be like, but it wasn't.

A deep trench had been gouged into the land.

Was that a moat? It didn't seem to be filled with water. A dry moat? Or maybe they had dug a massive hole, and built Ahsvasin in the bottom of it?

The moat was maybe ten meters deep. Its width was even greater than that. Haruhiro eyeballed it at about twenty meters.

It's not impossible to cross the moat, he thought. It's a dry moat, so I can climb to the bottom and walk across. The problem is what comes after that. How do I enter Ahsvasin?

Should I just climb down and see what happens? No, now isn't the time for gambles. The sun will be up soon. I should hold back for now.

Haruhiro decided to wait inside one of the buildings until night. Kiichi seemed to get that, and led him to a safe place. This time it looked like a closet, filled with sundry items. It was dusty, but easy to stay in compared to the last place. He hardly ever sensed any gobs, and even decided to lie down and go to sleep.

The day was long. He had plenty of time to think about things.

When night fell again, Haruhiro decided to check how far down he could go inside the building. He had a vague sense that there might be a space underneath the moat. If there was, could he get inside it through this building?

Once he had descended a long way, he found an exit with a door. There were no gobs around. He hesitated a little, but made up his mind.

He walked up to the door. He tried pushing and pulling the handle, but it

didn't budge. Then he tried turning the handle. That got the door to move. It slowly opened. He had tried his best to keep quiet, but it was impossible to open the door without making some noise. And it was more grating than creaking.

He peered out through the opening. Kiichi nimbly slipped through it.

It was a tunnel road. Faintly bright. A little farther down the way there was a T-junction. It looked like there was a lamplight past there.

He heard something moving behind him. A gob? There was a gob approaching from inside the building.

It would actually be more dangerous to turn back now. Haruhiro opened the door a little more, and went outside. He closed it behind him. It made an awfully big noise, and he broke into a cold sweat. Had the gobs inside the building heard that? He didn't know. He'd already closed the door, so he had no way to check.

He must have gotten impatient, even though he hadn't meant to. He'd crossed a dangerous bridge now.

Kiichi vanished around the T-junction. To the left. Kiichi had turned left.

Haruhiro chased after Kiichi. Out of caution, he stopped at the T-junction, poking just his face out so he could look both ways. He thought his heart was going to stop.

There. On the right side. Gobs. Not far. Maybe five meters away. They had a lamp on the ground, which they were squatting next to, doing something. They hadn't noticed him. Actually, they were looking down at the ground. Copper armor. Helmets. Shields on their backs, and spears leaning against the tunnel wall. They were armed. These were guard gobs out on patrol, huh?

Haruhiro pulled his face back in. Kiichi had gone left. The guard gobs hadn't spotted him. Well, from the way they were acting, they weren't going to pay any attention to Kiichi. If they didn't think something was there, Haruhiro might be surprised to find that they failed to notice him, too.

He checked the guard gobs once more. They were still squatting over there, doing whatever it was that they were doing. They seemed to be talking in

hushed voices.

There's no telling when the gobs in the building might come out of the door behind me.

I'm going to submerge myself.

Sink.

—Stealth.

Haruhiro went left at the T-junction. Even without turning back, he could tell what the guard gobs were doing. They were still squatting.

The tunnel road soon came to a stop, and turned right. There was no sign of Kiichi. The guard gobs seemed to be on the move. He heard footsteps.

Haruhiro continued down the tunnel road. There was another T-junction. Kiichi poked his head out from the left side quickly, then vanished back down that path. Haruhiro followed. The road curved to the right as it descended. It had quite the slope. He caught up to Kiichi. Or so he'd thought, but Kiichi was fast. It looked like things opened up on the other side of this road.

It was wide.

Really wide.

And the ceiling was high, too.

There were no holes in it. Despite that, it was bright. No, in terms of the actual amount of light, it was probably dim. But it felt pretty bright.

There were these glowing things flying around. Not one or two of them, either. Lots of them.

What in the world were they? They looked like strings. Or snakes. But snakes didn't fly. Were they insects? They didn't look like they had wings. They were thin and flat, and gave off a slight yellowish glow. They just twisted around to fly along slowly. They varied a lot in length. Anywhere from ten to thirty centimeters. Some were pretty thin, too.

Were they alive? Maybe he ought to call them lightworms. It wasn't clear that they were worms, though.

Whatever the case, thanks to the lightworms he had a fairly good grasp of what this place was like, even if he couldn't see it clearly.

These were probably the underground gardens in front of Ahsvasin. There were lines of what seemed to be statues, and he could pass in between them. The statues were goblin-shaped. Basically, gob statues. They weren't life-sized. They had to be double, no, triple their actual heights. But the statues were more than just decoration. They were climbable, and every statue had armed goblins on top of it. Some stood, some didn't, all keeping a wary eye for intruders. One was on the leg of a statue of a cross-legged gob, and another was sitting on the same statue's shoulder with one knee up. Generally, there were always at least one or two armed gobs per gob statue, and sometimes there could be as many as five. There weren't as many statues as the countless lightworms, but it wasn't just a couple dozen of them. It was more than that.

Kiichi hadn't stepped into the underground front garden. Obviously, Haruhiro didn't, either.

He wouldn't say that security was tight, but he still wasn't convinced he could make it through.

The distance from one gob statue to another varied. Sometimes it was a meter, other times it was as much as three. He spotted gobs walking between the statues here and there, too.

If there was a battle going on, or something else drawing the gobs' attention, he might have been able to do something. However, even if some were relaxing, these armed gobs were alert.

He had to conclude it would be tough. At this point, at least. If he took his time, he might find an opening he could use.

He didn't feel confident. In fact, it was best to write this off as impossible.

No matter how cautiously he proceeded, the armed gobs would definitely find him. If even one noticed him, dozens would attack, and he'd be surrounded. From what he could see, a good number of them carried crossbows. He had to take that into account, too.

"...I have no choice but to do this," Haruhiro said in the quietest voice he

could, then crouched and patted Kiichi on the head.

Kiichi looked up at Haruhiro.

“I’m counting on you. Head back to the others.”

Kiichi let out the faintest meow in reply.

Haruhiro nodded three times. Everything was prepared. He breathed in, then out, and stretched. He pulled a dagger from its sheath. Not his own. The blade was red. Hi’irogane. This was Viceroy Bogg’s knife. Nodding once more, he returned the hi’irogane knife to its sheath.

“I’m heading out.”

Haruhiro stepped into the front garden.

Instead of erasing his presence, he expanded his senses as far outside himself as he could, to their utmost limits.

It was like he wasn’t here, but looking at himself from somewhere else. Almost like he was another person.

The first to lay eyes on Haruhiro was the gob sitting on the left shoulder of the nearest gob statue.

The armed gob seemed to instantly recognize there was something there, and that it wasn’t one of its kind. It started to stand, twisted its neck around, and let out a “Wohw.” Then, thinking something like, *Oh, come on, is that a human?* it shouted, “Fauh!” and readied its crossbow.

That set a whole chain of events in motion. There was an excited hubbub from the armed goblins on all the gob statues. The first armed gob let loose a bolt from its crossbow. So long as Haruhiro knew the shot was coming, he didn’t have much to fear from crossbows. He twisted out of the way of the incoming projectile, but he didn’t run away. Not yet. He waited patiently.

The first armed gob jumped down from its perch.

At the same time, a little farther away, another gob took a shot with its crossbow from on top of another statue. Haruhiro saw this one coming too, so he dodged it with minimal effort.

The first gob hit the ground. Just before it did, Haruhiro rushed between the statues.

Four, no, five armed gobs stood in his way. Some had crossbows in their hands, while others had their spears pointed towards him. They were still confused, though.



Haruhiro charged the armed gobs. Only one of them managed to thrust its spear at him. Haruhiro stepped in, grabbing the shaft and twisting. The armed gob dug its heels in, trying not to lose its weapon. Haruhiro let go without fighting for it, and kept rushing them. He broke through in an instant, and continued past.

Haruhiro kicked one or two of them, sending them sprawling to the ground as he passed. He then took off running before the other armed gobs could attack.

He wanted to use the gob statues to keep the armed gobs from surrounding him. But he didn't have the leeway to both think and move now. No matter where he went, no matter which way he turned, there were armed gobs there. Some of the clever ones had stayed on their gob statues, and were taking aim at Haruhiro with their crossbows.

How many times had a spear or bolt grazed him? He couldn't afford to count.

Even if there were times he thought, *This is dangerous*, he mysteriously found himself unafraid. If he let everything frighten him and tensed up, or did something stupid, he'd either be badly hurt, or be impaled, or shot to death.

That said, he had to admit he was impressed he was still alive.

He'd long since lost track of where he was. At this point, there was always at least one armed gob within a half-meter radius of Haruhiro. The spear wounds in his left thigh and upper right arm were not shallow. They ached, and badly.

Before he had time to think, *I may be screwed*, Haruhiro had drawn the hi'irogane knife.

"Mod Bogg! Hi'irogane!" he shouted, raising the knife up high.

He meant to dodge the spear one of the armed gobs thrust at him, but felt a strong impact in his shoulder. It hadn't skewered him, but the spear had shaved a bit off the top of his right shoulder.

"Hi'irogane!"

Haruhiro raised his voice, grasping the spear with both hands and pushing it back with brute strength. The gob managed to keep hold of the spear, but was forced to its knees to do it.

“Mod Bogg! Hi’irogane!”

Haruhiro kicked that gob in the chin, and swung the knife around.

The armed gobs were shouting. They didn’t attack. They backed one, two paces away.

“Hi’irogane! Mod Bogg! Hi’irogane!”

“Hi’irogane, hi’irogane,” the armed gobs all said. No small number of them were looking around in search of something. They were clearly confused. What should they do? They couldn’t make that call for themselves. They needed someone to decide. That was probably what their reaction meant.

Kiichi was maybe ten meters away, on top of one of the gob statues. Looking at Haruhiro, of course.

Their eyes met.

—Or at least it felt that way.

Kiichi suddenly seemed shocked by something, and looked away. Where had his gaze moved? Probably to the top of one of the statues near Haruhiro. It happened right after that.

Something came flying at him. He knew that much.

I’ll dodge it, he was thinking when something struck him in the neck. Or rather, something like a rope wrapped around his neck.

Crap!

Am I gonna die?

“Gweh!”

It tightened around his neck. Then there was a jerk, pulling him upwards. Haruhiro struggled. He used his left hand to search for whatever was around his neck. It was hard. Metal? Like a collar. He strained his eyes downward, and saw it was red. Red metal. Hi’irogane? He looked up. There it was, on top of the statue next to him. A goblin. It had a big scar on its face. And Kiichi was looking its way. *That one, huh?* The goblin had a piece of red equipment, presumably made of hi’irogane. The rope or chain extending from it was wrapped around

Haruhiro's neck. Haruhiro was bound to the object that was strangling him.

"Sungyah!"

The scarred goblin pulled on the rope, or chain, or whatever it was. Haruhiro nearly lost consciousness. It was all he could do not to drop Bogg's knife.

Kiichi was gone now.

The rope suddenly slackened, and Haruhiro fell to his knees.

Then the goblin pulled on it again.

"Ough..."

I may have messed up.

Sorry, everyone...

13. I Offer Up My Pain, and Pray

...I hear something.

What was that noise?

It hurts.

His body ached.

All over.

“...Urgh.”

A voice.

Was it his?

“Ahh...”

He tried to speak again.

It's mine.

I knew it.

It apparently was his voice.

Which meant...

“I'm... still... a... live...?”

Where is this?

It was dark. Almost pitch black. Almost. Not completely.

Still, it hurt. His body ached. That wasn't all. It was more than just pain.

What was it?

Was he numb?

What was going on?

He didn't know. He couldn't even figure out what kind of position he was in.

He wasn't standing. Wasn't sitting, either. Did that mean he was lying down? He was on his side. Not lying on his back, or his front.

His left side was probably on the bottom. Was that why? The flow of blood was cut off, so he felt numb. Especially in his left arm. He couldn't even be sure it was still there.

Could he move? He wouldn't know until he tried to.

Yeah. I'll try moving.

"Ngh... Ngh..."

He could move his right arm, somewhat. But even the slightest movement hurt like hell, so he didn't really want to.

He wanted to just stay put.

"...I can't..."

He couldn't afford to do that.

Try things out one by one.

He tested his fingers, wrists, elbows, and shoulders. They moved, to a degree. On his right arm, the one not underneath him, at least. But was he tied up? He was probably bound at the wrists. His arms were behind him, tied with rope or something similar.

"...My feet, too...?"

It looked like his ankles were bound the same way.

He had a feeling it wasn't good for him to have been lying on his left side for so long. He was already exhausted, and couldn't feel anything. Not just in his left arm, but in his left leg, too.

He tried to get onto his back. He just needed to roll to the right. That was all it would take, but he couldn't seem to do it.

"Fina... lly..."

With great strain, he managed it. His bound hands were underneath his body now, which was really uncomfortable. The numbness subsided, and pain grew in its place. Numbness or pain. Which was better? Both were unpleasant.

“This is tough...”

Well, he couldn't complain. He was alive.

That was a spot of good luck within bad luck, you know?

He had thought he was about to die.

It wouldn't have been strange if he had. That's what the situation was like. He still half-suspected he was actually dead. But if he was, he shouldn't be able to think like this, so he had to still be among the living.

Where was this? The place had a ceiling. There were walls to his left and on the side his head was pointing towards. There were bars on his right, and those lightworm things were fluttering through the air on the other side.

One of the lightworms came in through the bars. It leisurely circled around the ceiling.

Was this a jail, or something like that? It might be. It was like he was in solitary confinement.

“This's... bad...”

The shoes he'd been wearing were gone. He was barefoot. It wasn't just his shoes. He had no clothes, either. All that he had left was his underwear.

That they might take everything he had on him had been within the realm of expectations. He'd even prepared for this eventuality. He'd hidden thin razors all over his clothes, and in the soles of his boots. Had they seen through that? Or had they just stripped him as a matter of course? Either way, this was maybe the third worst outcome he had imagined.

The worst was him dying, obviously. The goblins killing him. He'd managed to avoid that, apparently. For now, at least.

The next worst was not being killed outright, but close to it, and left in no state to do anything. It looked like it wasn't that bad.

The next to next worst was being taken captive, with nothing on him that he could use. Basically, the exact situation he found himself in now.

Where was this? Inside Ahsvasin? What if it was outside? That would be a

problem.

Was there no way to confirm he was inside Ahsvasin? The lightworms. The first place he'd seen them was in the underground gardens in front of Ahsvasin. There were lightworms here, too. This jail cell was inside Ahsvasin. That's what he wanted to assume, but it was no more than an optimistic assumption on his part.

He shouldn't make his move yet. He had to wait. Wait? For what?

Until he could be confident that, whatever else had happened, he had managed to make it inside Ahsvasin.

Would waiting bring him any certainty? He might wait only to be tortured, then killed. No, if they meant to kill him, they'd have done it already. That was one way to look at it. If it were humans he was dealing with, he'd be more or less sure of it.

But they were goblins. He couldn't even guess at how goblins thought. They might have had some process that they went through before killing humans they captured inside the New City.

For the moment, he was in pain, unbelievable pain, but he was managing to tolerate it somehow. It could get worse, though. He might lose too much blood, or his wounds might fester, rendering him unconscious. He might die like that.

The spear wounds in his upper right arm, left thigh, and left shoulder were not shallow, after all. His neck hurt pretty bad, too. That was where the goblin had gotten him with that weird tool. His face bothered him, too. They must have dragged him here, because he had suffered a fair number of scrapes and bumps along the way. His nose was either bleeding, or had been but already stopped. Anyway, it was completely stuffed up. He could only breathe through his mouth.

His belly and back were probably hurt pretty bad, too, but he couldn't tell through all his other suffering. Pain was canceling pain out. No, it would be nice if that was true, but he just couldn't judge how serious the pain was. It was still there.

I can't wait — probably.

It was impossible for him to just relax to begin with, but if he was going to keep trying to tolerate the pain and then just die anyway, that was too pathetic. It was hard to claim he had reserves of strength left, but he realized he should probably move while he could. Or rather, that he had no other choice.

He was going to have to rely on the option he'd wanted to resort to the least. What else could he do? He'd already decided on it. He just had to act now.

It was impossible while he was on his back, though, so he rolled back onto his left side once more. His wrists being bound was trouble, but he somehow managed to get into a position that let him feel around his right side with his right hand.

It wasn't easy. His left shoulder, which was on the bottom, hurt especially badly. His breathing was labored.

It hurts. Why does it hurt so bad? Oh, screw this. I can't take it anymore. I want to quit. I want to cry, too. I won't, though. I don't know. Maybe I am crying. It's okay to cry. I mean, no one's looking. I won't, though.

The nails on both his hands were sharpened, not trimmed.

I didn't want to do this. Not if I could avoid it. I will, though.

He started scratching his flank with his index finger. Hard. As hard as he possibly could.

No dice, huh? This isn't going to work. Not like this.

He pinched his skin between his index finger and thumb. He twisted, and twisted harder.

"Ngh...! Guh, guh, guh, nghhh...!"

He wanted to loosen his grip. Obviously, he wouldn't.

His skin tore.

"Owww..."

He had a hole in his right side now.

I think it's large enough to put my finger through. No, looks like it isn't.

He would have to expand it, then.

You say that like it's going to be easy.

No one had said anything of the sort. He forcibly widened the hole, and stuffed his index finger in. Under his skin.

Oh, crap. Oh, crap. Oh, crap. I don't like this. I really don't. I don't want to do this.

But he found it.

It was there.

The relic.

The bud-shaped object that Hiyo had implanted in him.

He'd known it would be, though. What good did just knowing that do him? It was nothing to be happy about. He had to pull it out now. He couldn't grab it with his index finger alone. He'd need his thumb, too. Did he have to hurt himself even more? Yeah. He had no choice.

"Ghhhhhhhhhhhh... Ahh... Urghhhhhhhhh..."

It was in. He got his thumb in, and was able to grab the relic. Now he just had to pull it out. That wasn't hard. Pretty simple, really.

"Auuuuuuugwarghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...!"

Just then, a scream echoed through the room.

What was that? Goblins?

It probably was. He was hearing goblin voices.

And noises. Sounds. Footsteps? Approaching.

Oh, crap. What was he going to do now? The relic. He almost had it. All he had to do was pull it out. Was it okay to do that? Or not? Should he leave it there? But he was bleeding. He had other wounds, too, though. He was already covered in blood. They wouldn't notice.

The footsteps were pretty close now. Something struck the wall or bars as they approached.

"Oh, geez... I don't know what to do...!"

He pulled out the relic, holding it in his right hand, and turned to face the bars.

It hurt. Oh, damn, it hurt. His side. Because it was a fresh wound. That had to be making it hurt even more.

It came, striking the bars with a red stick as it did.

The scarred goblin.

It had a number of other goblins in tow. Four? Five of them?

It looked like the thing the scarred goblin was holding was the same weapon from before. The stick had a ring-shaped part on the end that could be detached and thrown so that it would catch the enemy by the neck. Was it like a lasso?

The scarred goblin gave directions to the other goblins with it.

One of the goblins stepped forward and touched the bars. It looked like there was a door there. They were going to unlock and open it.

His eyes stopped on the goblin at the rear. Hold on... Was that even a goblin?

Its skin was awfully pale compared to the other goblins. It looked white, at least under the illumination provided by the lightworms. From a human perspective, goblins had hunched backs, with their heads sticking out in front. But this goblin was different. It stood upright, though it was still about the same height as the others. It had a scrawny, frail build and, in another departure from what was common in goblins, it wore a loose black robe.

The door opened, and the scarred goblin entered.

That white goblin, could it be an ugoth? Wasn't it a sage?

The scarred goblin walked up to him. It stepped on his head.

"Yee, hee, hee, hee!"

Screw you.

It would be a lie to say Haruhiro wasn't angry, but he was more interested in the goblin he thought was an ugoth.

The other goblins didn't enter the cell.

“Hey...!” Haruhiro shouted with everything he had. The ugoth looked at him. If Hiyo wasn’t lying, ugoths understood the human language. He was going to yell something more, but the scarred goblin ground its foot into his head, then raised it up high and—

Huh? What? What is it gonna do? Kick me? Is it gonna kick me?

“Agah...!”

Oh, he felt that one. For a moment, he blanked out. What about the relic? It was fine. He was holding it. It was still in his hand, barely.

Just as he adjusted his grip on the relic, the scarred goblin kicked him again. In the chin this time. If he hadn’t clenched his teeth just in time, he might have bitten his tongue.

His head felt hazy. He had to be careful not to drop the relic. No matter what, he couldn’t lose it. He had to hold on tight. If he dropped it, he was finished.

“Do... you... speak...”

Ugoths were supposed to speak the human language. He wanted it to hear him out.

“Daaaag!”

The scarred goblin struck Haruhiro with that tool. The ring opened, wrapped around his neck, and closed. He couldn’t breathe. It hurt.

“Do you speak the human—”

It was pulling him.

The scarred goblin was trying to drag Haruhiro.

It was no use. He couldn’t talk. All that came out was, “Gah,” and, “Goh.” Was it time?

Should I use the relic now?

The scarred goblin was unrelenting. And strong, too. Haruhiro was bound hand and foot. He couldn’t walk. With his hands tied behind him, he couldn’t even crawl on all fours. The goblin kept dragging him like that. Oh, crap. Forget if that goblin was an ugoth or not. He couldn’t breathe. Was he going to pass

out? Or, worse yet, die?

The scarred goblin didn't stop once he was out of the cell. It kept dragging Haruhiro. How far was it planning to take him?

If that's how it's going to be, I'll use the relic.

No — wait.

The scarred goblin was trying to take Haruhiro somewhere. With an ugoth. Ugoths supposedly served the mogado. If Hiyo wasn't lying. What did that mean?

“Uagh, gah, guhh...”

It hurts, damn it. I can't breathe. I'm suffocating here. You're killing me.

The scarred goblin kept dragging Haruhiro. Where was it trying to take him? It had chosen not to kill him.

Right. Yes, this hurt, and he was suffering, but Haruhiro wasn't dead yet. They'd taken him down easily in the underground garden. This had to be deliberate, right? The scarred goblin was holding back in some way. Maybe it was dragging Haruhiro in a way that wouldn't knock him out.

Where was it trying to take Haruhiro?

To the mogado, perhaps? If so...

“Nguh, wah, gagh, augh...”

Oh, shut up.

His voice kept leaking out on its own. He couldn't stop it. He was suffering. Was the scarred goblin really holding back? Maybe not. Wasn't it just dragging him as hard as it could? Like if he died, he died, and it'd deal with that if it happened?

Whatever the case, it was treating him terribly. Was this any way to treat a person? It was beyond barbaric. In the end, it was just a goblin. He'd been wrong to expect better of it. What had he been hoping for? Nothing. It hurt. He couldn't breathe. It felt like he was drowning. Drowning as it dragged him.

I can't take it. There's no way. I'm seriously done for.

He was probably already way past his limits. He was only clinging to consciousness by complaining inside his head like this. Oh, and by insulting them. Hating them. Cursing them. Why should he have to go through this? What had he ever done to deserve this? Had he done anything to deserve this sort of punishment?

Oh, right, I did kill goblins, huh?

He'd apparently killed a whole lot of them before losing his memory, too.

Maybe he was in no position to complain. If this was the goblins' revenge, they might be reasonably justified.

It made him want to give up.

Not to argue that it was all a matter of determination, but if he lost his will at a time like this, he was done for. No matter how ugly he made it look, he had to keep clinging to life. There was no way he could endure without that feeling.

It's hopeless. This is meaningless. I should stop trying to endure.

I just want to relax.

If I have to die, make it quick.

As quick as you can.

Could you just let me die already?

He was on the verge. He wanted to die. He couldn't die on his own, and wasn't going to fade away just yet, so he silently pleaded for them to end him. If this slow, hopeless dying of his went one step further, then with that one misstep he would give up on survival. Was he stopping himself just short of that? Or not? No, he must have been. Because Haruhiro still had the relic in his hand. That proved it.

All of a sudden, instead of being dragged, Haruhiro was thrown forward, and rolled sideways. It wasn't clear if it happened just before that, at the same time, or just after, but the ring around his neck came loose.

His throat ached, but breathing became easier. The pain as he breathed in and out was intense. Even so, he took in all the air he could. Though he coughed and felt like he was going to puke, the oxygen was rapidly spreading through his

body. He could feel it.

His face was a mess of tears, blood, saliva, and who knew what else. He had no idea what was going on. He couldn't see very well, and he couldn't smell a thing. He was in so much pain that nothing made sense.

"Heah! Mogado! Gwagajin!"

It was the scarred goblin's voice. Mogado. Gwagajin.

The goblin king. The Mogado. Mogado Gwagajin.

Could it be that this was the royal chamber, or something like that?

"Mogado!"

"Gwagajin!"

"Mogado, Gwagajin!"

"Heah! Mogado! Heah!"

"Mogado! Gwagajin!"

The goblins repeated the call. There was no doubt about it.

Haruhiro blinked repeatedly. He wanted to do something about his blurry vision.

Little by little, his sight returned to him. Goblins.

There were so many goblins.

Around Haruhiro and the scarred goblin, the mass of goblins formed a circle ten or even twenty bodies deep.

It was pretty bright. Was it lightworms? No. The light was shining down from above. This was sunlight, wasn't it? There was a skylight. Was it daytime now? It looked like it.

Where was Mogado Gwagajin?

There.

About ten meters away, there was some sort of scaffold or tower. It was golden. Up on top, there was... a human? Was that a human? It couldn't be. It was a goblin that wore fine clothes of red, blue, and white fabric, like a high-

ranking human might. He held a red staff, and had a crown on his head. That had to be the Mogado. The goblins' king.

Mogado Gwagajin.

Beneath the golden tower were white goblins in black robes. It was more than one, but how many of them were there? Four of them? There were four ugoths.

"Heah! Mogado! Gwagajin!"

"Mogado! Mogado!"

"Gwagajin! Heah! Mogado Gwagajin!"

The goblins wouldn't stop cheering. Some stamped in time with the cries, while others beat their chests. The goblins were excited. Even the scarred goblin next to Haruhiro was swinging its tool around, crying its master's name.

The four ugoths just stood there. Mogado Gwagajin, up on his golden tower, sat there on some sort of chair, not moving in the slightest. He was like an ornament. Was that a living goblin? Or was that a model made to resemble the goblin mogado? No.

He was real.

Mogado Gwagajin raised his hi'irogane staff.

The moment he did, the goblins grew even noisier.

Should I wait? Do I keep waiting? Or act now?

Don't stall.

Don't rush.

Both seemed like they were right. Perhaps both were wrong.

It was only a feeling. There was no logic to it. Haruhiro had to acknowledge that.

My head's not working. It's no good. I can't think straight.

Haruhiro pressed down on the bottom part of the bud-shaped relic. It took more than a little strength to push it inwards. He gave it all he had.

Work. Please. I'm begging you. All I can do is pray now.

The relic began vibrating. It seemed like it had activated. Haruhiro tossed it. His hands were bound behind him, so he couldn't see it, and it was too noisy for him to hear it hit the floor.

This is going to be all right, right? It's working, right?

There was a loud *twoooooooooooooooooong*, making the goblins look up, and they gulped or screeched as they jumped away.

Haruhiro turned his head to look behind him. He had been told what would happen, but he hadn't been given an actual demonstration of the relic working, so he stared in mute amazement for a moment. They couldn't afford to test it. These relics were one-use items, and came in a set. When you activated one, it triggered the other, too.

He could only describe what he was seeing as wondrous. There was an oblong hole in space, maybe the size of a door left half-open. On the other side of it was another place entirely. It was connected to the ruins in the Old City.

One of the relics was implanted in Haruhiro's right flank.

Hiyo was carrying the other.

Ideally, he would have gotten into Ahsvasin without being captured. That was what Haruhiro had been trying to do, but he'd failed.

The next best thing was to get in as far as he could, then use the relic. That, or to use it when he was taken prisoner.

Kiichi should have let their comrades know he'd been captured. They would be waiting for this to happen at any moment.

Kuzaku was the first to leap through to this side.

"Hoo-rahhhh...!"

Kuzaku bellowed like an idiot, and sent the scarred goblin flying, then swung his large katana around, intimidating the goblins.

"Out of the way! Now! You wanna die? Gwarrgh?!"

What are you, some kind of thug?

Haruhiro wanted to poke fun at him. Kuzaku was a sight for sore eyes. It was a

little embarrassing to admit that. Besides, he didn't have time to be relieved.

"Haru...!"

Next came Merry, then Setora and Kiichi at about the same time.

Merry had likely already come up with multiple possible scenarios, and decided what to do in each of them. Her eyes widened as she spotted Haruhiro, and she immediately made the sign of the hexagram.

"O light! May Lumiaris' divine protection be upon you... Sacrament!"

Oh, this light was a genuine miracle. Honestly, Haruhiro had been on the verge of death. He wouldn't have lasted much longer. It had felt like he was already half dead. The pain that had made him think dying would be easier, that hopeless suffering, rapidly faded, and was gone entirely in no time.

Kiichi made skillful use of a small blade to cut the ropes binding Haruhiro's hands and feet.

Setora spun her spear around, striking a goblin that was still nearby. She threw the dagger she kept at her waist to Haruhiro.

"Haruhiro!"

"Right!"

It bugged him a bit that he was wearing nothing but his underwear, but he didn't have time to complain. Haruhiro took the dagger and stood up, looking at Mogado Gwagajin. He was still on top of the golden tower. He hadn't moved. Neither had the ugoths.

Right after Neal and Hiyo dove over to this side, the hole in space created by the relic shrank, made a bizarre screeching noise, and then vanished without a trace.

There was no turning back.

Even for Hiyo, the one who had come up with the plan, this was an all-or-nothing gamble.

"Hear me, wise ugoth!"

Still, it was hard to believe she could sound so dignified.

“I offer a humble proposal to His Majesty, the brave and glorious Mogado Gwagajin!”

It didn't change the weird getup she was in, but as far as the goblins were concerned she was just another human. They wouldn't see anything strange about the way she dressed. Hiyo stepped forward without hesitation, spreading her arms wide, thrusting her chest out, and looking up at Mogado Gwagajin.

The goblins stared at Hiyo, like they were thinking, *What? What's going on? What's with that human woman?* The four ugoths looked artificial, and it was hard to figure them out, but they turned their eyes to Hiyo, and seemed to be listening.

“What a hero,” Neal muttered. He was presumably talking about Haruhiro, but Haruhiro could only assume he was being insincere.

“Wise ugoths! I beseech you! Please, convey our intentions to His Majesty, Mogado Gwagajin!”

Hiyo raised her voice further. But more than that, she took a step or two forward.

“We do not seek further conflict with the goblin race! We wish to forge peace with your people!”

Without taking his eyes off Hiyo, he shouted something like, “Rah! Dashah!” Probably to the ugoths at the bottom of the tower. Haruhiro didn't know for sure, but assumed it meant, *What is that human saying?*

One of the ugoths looked up at Mogado Gwagajin and began to speak. Haruhiro couldn't make it out over the babbling of the other goblins. It seemed Mogado Gwagajin couldn't, either, because he shouted and struck the base of his staff against the floor of the golden tower in anger. That was probably a *Silence!* The goblins all shut up.

Haruhiro weaved between the goblins, already closing in on the golden tower. He was using Stealth, so no one noticed him.

The goblins swarmed around the golden tower, surrounding Hiyo and the rest of the group. The four ugoths were standing at the four corners of the tower.

There was a five-to six-meter space between the tower and the wall. Haruhiro made it there. Mogado Gwagajin must have climbed up and down here. There was a ladder set up.

Mogado Gwagajin and the ugoths were still discussing something.

Haruhiro climbed the ladder.

The golden tower was quite impressive. It looked like the scaffolding was made of metal. Though the copious use of gold decorations might not have been tasteful or pleasing to the eye, there were powerful-looking patterns carved into it, and it was clear it had been carefully constructed.

Haruhiro reached the top of the tower.

Mogado Gwagajin sat right in front of his eyes. There was a small chair here, but the goblin was basically straddling it. He really was big for a goblin. Even if you took away his hi'irogane crown, he was easily over 150 centimeters tall. Thanks to that, Haruhiro was able to hide behind him if he kept his posture low.

Looking down from the golden tower, it finally hit him how large this room was, and just how many goblins there were.

This space, which was presumably Mogado Gwagajin's audience hall, was not square, but a round-ish shape more than thirty meters across. The ceiling was pretty high, too. It was five, maybe six meters high? There were countless ovular skylights. It looked like they had glass in them.

There were no less than a thousand goblins in the hall. Maybe double that.

Near the golden tower, there were goblins with hi'irogane equipment. The close associates of Mogado Gwagajin that Barbara-sensei had called the Hundred.

With this many goblins surrounding them, Hiyo, Kuzaku, and the others looked so small and insignificant. If Mogado Gwagajin gave the order, the goblins would all descend on the humans. No matter how good of a fight the humans put up, they would take maybe a hundred goblins with them at best. Even if they slaughtered two or three hundred, it was unlikely they could escape from this hall.

This was life and death for all of them.

He didn't like it, but their lives depended on Hiyo's speech.

"Mogado Gwagajin!"

Hiyo pulled a sword from her bag. It was far too long to possibly fit in there. But what was more important, at least to the goblins, was the fact it was made of hi'irogane.

"I have brought the sword of your right hand, the Viceroy, Mod Bogg! We have collected many other pieces of hi'irogane equipment, too! We will return them to you as proof of our friendship!"

"Dasshah!" Mogado Gwagajin shouted.

The ugoths were saying something.

Haruhiro could grapple Mogado Gwagajin at any time. He could probably even kill him. But that was a last resort.

"I am sure His Majesty the great Mogado Gwagajin and his wise ugoths must already know this, but we once formed a secret pact with the goblin race, and chose to take the path of mutual prosperity!"

The ugoths were translating what Hiyo said for Mogado Gwagajin.

"It has been a long time since that promise ceased to be upheld, but we are confident that we can cooperate with the goblin race! It is unquestionable that, by joining hands with us, the goblin race will profit greatly—"

Mogado Gwagajin pointed his staff at Hiyo. He was likely ordering her to be silent. Hiyo seemed to take it that way, and closed her mouth.

The ugoths translated Hiyo's statement for Mogado Gwagajin. Mogado Gwagajin nodded, then nodded again. His interpreters hadn't been able to keep up. Was that why Mogado Gwagajin had silenced Hiyo in the middle? Was that all?

The ugoth finished translating.

Mogado Gwagajin slammed his staff against the floor of the golden tower.

There was something ominous about it.

When he sensed that, Haruhiro was already moving.

Mogado Gwagajin was probably about to give the goblins an order. Something along the lines of, *Kill all the humans*, maybe. Haruhiro had to stop him. There was no other way.

“Keah—”

Mogado Gwagajin was about to shout something, then turned to look behind him, surprising Haruhiro more than a little. Had he noticed him?

He’d detected Haruhiro? This goblin mogado was special.

Because he was shocked by it, his methods got sloppy, or rough rather, but he grabbed Mogado Gwagajin and held a dagger to his throat. Mogado Gwagajin was big for a goblin, but Haruhiro was still bigger. The goblin seemed tough, but if he showed any sign of resistance, Haruhiro wouldn’t hesitate to act. What would happen if he killed Mogado Gwagajin here? It was a shame he didn’t have time to think that through, but he had no choice. This was his only option.

“Fuuungh... Fungh... Fuuumh...”

Mogado Gwagajin was overwhelmed with regret. He snorted angrily, ground his teeth, and glared at Haruhiro with a look of incredible rage on his face.

The goblins in the hall were completely silent. They must have believed that one peep out of them could spell the death of their master.

“S-Stop! Don’t!” One of the ugoths at the bottom of the golden tower shouted.

“We want you to hear everything we have to say. Tell Gwagajin that,” Haruhiro said, and the ugoth started translating.

Mogado Gwagajin simply grit his teeth, not responding.

I’d say it’s fifty-fifty, Haruhiro thought. He wasn’t thinking calmly. His heart was racing, and his legs felt a little weak. His hand quivered with fear. Thinking he had a fifty-fifty chance of this working was just a way to try to feign calm.

Mogado Gwagajin might say, *Just kill them*. In that case, Haruhiro would immediately end his life. If even one of them could make it out of the ensuing chaos alive, they’d be doing well.

Or perhaps he might come to the negotiating table. That, or pretend to, then try to escape his current predicament.

How was this fifty-fifty again?

“Alterna!”

Hiyo was desperate, too. Her tone and expression were both tense in a way he hadn’t seen from her before. He couldn’t imagine she was putting on an act.

“O Mogado Gwagajin! We are prepared to hand Alterna over to the goblin race once more!”

Haruhiro nearly let out a “Whuh?” He was super confused. It was tough to keep it from showing.

Hand over Alterna... Wait, what?

What the hell?

No one told me about this.

14. The Savior of Those Who Believe

To bottom line it, Mogado Gwagajin expressed an interest in Hiyo's, which was to say Jin Mogis's, offer.

We will save reflecting on what happened after that for later. The point is, after a series of events that required the utmost caution, Haruhiro and the others were able to leave Damuro.

Incidentally, Haruhiro got his stuff back, but his clothes were a torn and bloody mess. Damn it. But he couldn't borrow a new outfit from the goblins, and couldn't very well walk around naked, so he was forced to wear them.

When they arrived back in Alterna before sunset, the general called for a celebratory feast. Or so it was called, but all they did was gather in the dining hall for a dinner that, while they were eating better than the common soldiers, was not in any way fit to be called a feast. There was alcohol, too, but Haruhiro was in no mood to touch it. Aside from Hiyo constantly babbling, and the general tolerantly indulging her, there was no real conversation to be had.

Haruhiro and his party had done their job. So maybe they ought to be on guard against poisoning. But by the time Haruhiro hit on that thought, the meal was already half over. How could he have been so careless? Sensing his shock, Setora said, "It's fine."

Unlike Haruhiro, who had let exhaustion and everything else that was happening dull his judgment, Setora was alert. He saw Kiichi at Setora's feet, eating the same things as his master. Kiichi wasn't so dumb as to let himself be poisoned.

Haruhiro and his team could still be of use. That was the general's reading of the situation, it seemed.

It looked like it was entirely possible that he would get his alliance with the goblins.

They were going to return the hi'irogane weapons that they had captured.

That work would be carried out in the coming days.

At the same time, the general would dismantle the Expeditionary Force, and reorganize them as the Frontier Army. It was just a change in label, but the general planned to withdraw from the Kingdom of Arabakia, prepare a new war flag, and declare himself the Commander of the Frontier Army.

Then, Commander of the Frontier Army Jin Mogis and the goblin mogado Gwagajin would exchange a pledge of mutual non-aggression. Commander Mogis would go to Damuro in person, and Mogado Gwagajin would leave the New City to meet somewhere suitable in the Old City of Damuro.

This was what the pledge would state:

The Frontier Army would recognize Damuro and the area around it as the domain of the goblins, and would not violate it.

Further, the Frontier Army would have Alterna and the area around it as their domain. The goblins would not violate it.

This much Haruhiro and his party had been told in advance. What they weren't informed of was the next bit.

The Frontier Army would aim to secure the Free City of Vele. Once Vele was taken, the Frontier Army would return Alterna and the area around it to the goblins. From then on, the Frontier Army would recognize everything south of Damuro as the goblins' domain, and would not violate it.

South of Damuro included Alterna, of course, but the Tenryu Mountains were also south of there. The mainland of the Kingdom of Arabakia lay beyond the Tenryu Mountains. Did the goblins have the means to cross the Tenryus and take the mainland? No, obviously not. However, Jin Mogis suggested they would have the right to do it.

The more of Hiyo's explanation that Mogado Gwagajin heard through his ugoth interpreter, the happier he seemed. The goblin mogado even looked giddy to Haruhiro.

The goblins likely felt a major inferiority complex when it came to the other races. They likely feared them, too. *But it's not like we're evil or anything.* It was only human to want to think that. Goblins weren't human, but they did possess

some degree of intelligence, so one could understand if they felt the same way. They had their own culture, and their own civilization. They had their mogado, and their own society. They would get angry about people looking down on it, and if others recognized them, and showed due respect, they would be pleased, too.

The No-Life King had once treated the goblins as equal partners in his alliance. But perhaps the orcs and other races hadn't felt the same way.

In the orcish clans' and the undead's recent advance south, the goblins and kobolds attacked at the same time. Though the goblins received Alterna, and the kobolds gained Riverside Iron Fortress, the orcs and undead had largely packed up and left.

Ultimately, as far as the orcs and undead were concerned, the goblins and kobolds might have been no more than convenient tools.

Had Gwagajin, the mogado of the goblins, sensed that? That the orcs and undead were no friends of theirs? That they looked down on, and took advantage of, them? That they weren't allies at all?

It seemed that Jin Mogis had succeeded in flattering Mogado Gwagajin and winning his favor for now. Next would be the two of them meeting, and seeing where things went from there. There wasn't really any basis to think this, but Haruhiro suspected that the man seeking to become king of the frontier and the mogado of the goblins might, somewhat surprisingly, find they had a lot in common. He couldn't help but feel that way.

"Haruhiro," Kuzaku, who was sitting next to him, leaned in and whispered. "Uh, hey. Shouldn't we, y'know... bring up Shihoru-san soon?"

"Yeah."

Haruhiro knew that. He didn't need Kuzaku to remind him. Haruhiro had already been looking for the right time to broach the issue.

"Yes?"

The general's rusty eyes were fixed on Haruhiro. They seemed inorganic, without a shred of humanity. Those eyes made Haruhiro uneasy. That wasn't good.

“...I wanted to talk about something. Is that all right?”

“I don’t mind.”

The general wiped the area around his mouth with a napkin, then folded his hands on the dining table.

There was a ring on the index finger of his left hand. That blue stone. With the three-leaf pattern in it. That had to be a relic. What power did it hide?

“Say whatever you wish.”

From the moment they had first met him, Jin Mogis had seemed superhuman, as if nothing frightened him. Was there anything that could move this man? Even if he saw his own friends and family die before his eyes, he probably wouldn’t even raise an eyebrow. If he was threatened personally, well, he’d likely panic a little, but he wouldn’t completely lose his head. Maybe it was just an act. But even if he was simply playing the role of Jin Mogis the Unflappable, that was impressive in and of itself. If he never broke character, it was no different from the real thing.

It has to be just an act, Haruhiro thought.

He wouldn’t say the man was a paper tiger, but he was definitely putting up a strong front. Probably because he felt he couldn’t afford to show any weakness. It wasn’t like he was really as composed as he seemed.

As Haruhiro figured, the general certainly was a battle-hardened warrior, an experienced commander, so he could no doubt wield a sword better than most.

But Kuzaku was pretty good in a sword fight, too. He was blessed with the right physique for it, and didn’t scare easily. On top of that, he could do more than just swing his large katana around with nothing but brute force. He might not have been what you would call clever, but if you considered how many enemies he took on by himself, he had to be good at keeping an eye on multiple things at the same time. Also, each swing of Kuzaku’s large katana threatened his opponents with lethal damage.

If Kuzaku and the general fought in single combat, who would win? Obviously, there was no way to know without seeing it, but it was hard to imagine Kuzaku would go down easily. He’d make it a close fight, at the very least.

The rest of the party would be there, too. Kuzaku wouldn't have to fight alone. It might be cowardly, sure, but if they all ganged up on the general, it would probably be over in no time.

This was a dangerous topic, but they could kill the general if they decided to. But the general wasn't an idiot, either, so he had to know that. When the time came, Haruhiro and the others might refuse to heed his orders. That's why he took Shihoru hostage as a threat.

"It's about our comrade."

Once Haruhiro had said that much, the general snorted, his expression not changing in the slightest.

If you piss us off, you do know what will happen, right? We could end you. We did what you asked. We did it. Now you do what you ought to. Or else.

"Our comrade who isn't here."

"You mean your old comrades in the Volunteer Soldier Corps, perhaps?"

He wants to play dumb, huh? I want to start shouting. But no. I have to hold back. Now's not the time.

"No. Not them."

The general used his left index finger, which bore the ring, to tap his right hand twice, then cocked his head to the side.

"Who, then?"

Neal chuckled. Hiyo shrugged her shoulders. *Damn them.* The blood raced to Haruhiro's head.

He heard someone click their tongue. Looking over, he saw Kuzaku's face was turned downward, contorted with emotion. Merry looked pale. Hiyo was glaring at them.

Setora leaned down. He wondered what she was about to do, but she just stroked Kiichi's head. She was even smiling, as if she was totally unconcerned.

Haruhiro looked back to the general, who was, as always, unfazed.

Was this man really putting up a strong front? Or was he just unbelievably

dense? Was it possible the man had reached some sort of enlightenment after all the hell he had been through?

“We did our part. I think you should do yours, too. If you can’t pay our price, we can’t work.”

“Let me give you whatever ranks and honors you desire.”

When Haruhiro shook his head, the general’s brow furrowed faintly.

“How unambitious. What do you want instead? I know. We’ve been struggling to open the Yorozu Deposit Company’s treasure vault. Do you want to take a crack at it? They say it’s overflowing with incredible riches. I’ll give you a share.”

“We don’t need that junk.”

He did his best not to raise his voice. Was that out of pride? His way of opposing the general? He didn’t even know anymore.

“We just want you to return what’s ours.”

“You need a debt repaid? I’ll reward your efforts. I believe that’s what I’ve been saying this whole time.”

“Oh, come on...!” Kuzaku slammed his palms down on the table. It was pretty loud, but the general didn’t even glance in his direction. His eyes were set on Haruhiro.

“I have not, to my recollection, taken anything of yours. But let’s suppose I did. What would I gain by returning it to you?”

“What...?”

“There are a number of things that I can give to you. You may be too greedy to be satisfied with them, but I find it quite offensive when I have been trying to find some way to show my sincerity to you. If you seek more from me, how will you respond? What can you give me? What will be the price?”

“The price...” Haruhiro hung his head.

What? He’s not getting it. What the hell?

Was it all in vain? Had they just been made to work for free? Did the general have no intention of returning Shihoru from the beginning?

Or was there no way for him to return her?

Shihoru had been abducted, and was being held somewhere. Was that really it?

Or could it be something else?

Like she was already — already what?

Haruhiro didn't want to think about it. He was trying to avoid the thought. Wasn't the general taking advantage of that?

He didn't want to consider the worst possibility. So, since that couldn't be it, since that couldn't have happened, Haruhiro had to listen to the general. Had to obey him. He could only cling to what little hope there was.

Even if it didn't really exist.

Yes, there might have been no hope to begin with.

"I value you people," the general said, then, considering for a moment, "I value you highly," he corrected himself. "It will be young people like yourselves who open the way to the future in this frontier. It goes without saying that I need your strength. You people don't know me. There is likely some misunderstanding here. However, if I were to offer a word of advice to you young people, it would be that even if you can't accept the way things are at present, you should take the long view. The thick fog that hangs in the air now may have cleared come tomorrow."

Haruhiro raised his face, and looked the general directly in the eye once more.

"Why don't you be a little more direct? So we can understand."

"I would ask that you put your trust in me." The general smiled.

Unbelievably, it seemed full of benevolence, like the sort of smile a father might direct at his children.

"You'll not be mistreated. I'm thinking of all of you when I say this. It would run against my wishes to see flowers nipped in the bud."

15. Breaking

Once the group returned to their room in Tenboro Tower, Haruhiro just sat down, too overwhelmed to think. Even when his comrades tried to talk to him, all he could do was nod along half-heartedly. He couldn't be like this. He knew that, but what could he even do about it?

"Haru, here." Merry brought him something.

"Yeah..." Haruhiro responded, and then, after a while, realized Merry was still holding whatever it was. He hadn't accepted it from her, so of course she was.

"Thanks," Haruhiro took the thing and put it on the ground. *Is it late at night now?* he wondered. This room had no windows.

"Haru," someone called his name.

He looked and saw that Merry hadn't moved from where she was before.

"Yeah. ...What's up?"

"Get changed."

"Ohh... Right."

Apparently what Merry had brought him was clothes. There was something wrong with him if he didn't notice that.

"I look pretty awful, don't I? ...Yeah. I guess I should get changed, huh?"

Haruhiro stood up. He started stripping out of his torn and filthy clothes.

"...Haru?" Merry called his name again.

"Yeah. ...Oh!"

He had been about to get completely naked. He didn't need to take off his underwear, too.

"H-Hurry up and get dressed..."

At Merry's urging, Haruhiro put on a pair of pants and a shirt. There was still

more to wear. Did he have to put all of it on? He wasn't feeling up to it.

Haruhiro sat down, and hugged his knees. Merry sat next to him.

Kuzaku was wrapped in a blanket, apparently sleeping.

Setora was awake. She was leaning against the wall, arms crossed, maybe thinking about something. Kiichi was at her feet. It looked like he was asleep.

"Haru."

How many times had it been now? That Merry had called his name.

It was getting annoying.

That wasn't Merry's fault, though, obviously.

"Yeah."

"Are you okay?" Merry asked. How should he answer? There was no way he was okay. But it felt wrong to come out and say that. Whining wasn't going to fix things. He didn't want to lash out at her, either. This wasn't her fault.

There was no way he could answer.

But he couldn't just stay silent forever, either.

"...Yeah," he mumbled with a nod, and Merry seemed to understand.

"I'm sorry, I..."

Her expression said, *I messed up*. She bit her lip, ducking her head apologetically. When he saw her like that, Haruhiro felt absolutely pitiful.

"No... I'm the one who ought to..."

Ought to what? Say sorry? Is apologizing going to help? Is that going to resolve the problem? Will it help us go forward?

Haruhiro slapped his own cheeks.

Merry looked surprised. Go figure. Of course she'd be surprised.

Honestly, Haruhiro was shocked, too. What was he doing, out of nowhere? But he couldn't wake himself up otherwise. The thought had come to him on the spur of the moment. He wanted to wake up.

“I’m okay,” Haruhiro stated clearly one more time, and put on a smile. It had to look weird. More of a funny face than an actual smile. But Merry smiled back at him.

“Yeah.”

She apparently didn’t realize it herself, but Merry’s smile was pretty powerful. It had a certain gravity to it, you might say. Feeling his eyes being sucked in, Haruhiro quickly averted them.

“Uhh... Where did the clothes come from?”

“Neal brought them.”

“Huh? When?”

“It was a while ago.”

“...That’s not good. I didn’t notice at all.”

“It happens.”

Why was it that when Merry was kind to him he felt something squeeze tight in his chest?

“They’re from the general. According to Neal. You might not want to wear them, but it doesn’t look like there’s anything strange that’s been done to them, or anything like that.”

“Oh, yeah? ...Yeah. It’s fine. Now isn’t the time to go on about not wanting to owe him anything.”

“Could you put them on properly?”

Her tone was a little chiding, but it wasn’t that Merry was mad.

“...Right. I’ll get dressed.”

Haruhiro did as Merry told him to and fixed his clothes. They were all leather. The materials and production quality were good. The stitching was solid, too. It was somewhere between leather armor and leather clothes. There was a cloak included, too. A black leather cloak. It was hooded, and very light.

“It looks pretty good on you,” Merry said jokingly.

“Does it?”

Haruhiro tried moving around a little. The stains didn't stand out, but someone must have worn these before. The leather had softened a lot, and there were wrinkles in it. That made how well it fit him kind of creepy.

“These don't just look good, they seem practical, too.”

“Have you calmed down now?”

“A lot, yeah.”

Haruhiro sat next to Merry. He hunched his back, and breathed gently.

“...The general doesn't trust us. And obviously we don't trust him, either. But he's still trying to get us on his side.”

“Yes. No matter what he has to do to accomplish it.”

“Shihoru is alive,” Haruhiro said, then closely observed his own emotions.

Shihoru was alive. Did he just want to think that? Or did he have some logical basis that led him to believe it?

“The general would have to be a real idiot to kill her. Because if he did, we'd never be swayed by him. It's not impossible to keep on lying to us and telling us she's alive. But there's a risk we'd find out.”

“The general... will keep Shihoru alive, and use her. In order to keep us as his pawns.”

“But there could be an accident... It's possible something might go wrong, and the hostage... Shihoru might be hurt or killed.”

“...That's true. We can't rule it out.”

“In that case, the general might take the risk and lie. Because there's no way we'd accept it if he said he didn't mean to kill her.”

“If he was going to have to lie... wouldn't he make sure he could keep the lie up?”

“I agree. In that case, he'd eliminate all traces. Leave nothing behind. ...If he cremated the body, and scattered the ashes, there would be no way to prove whether she was dead or alive. Even if the general came out and told us she

was gone, we'd have no way to know if he was telling the truth."

"But if that is the case... We don't have to think about it. It won't do any good to consider it." Looking forward, Merry said, "Shihoru is alive. We have to operate under that premise."

"Yeah. I think that's good."

"Do you think the general will return Shihoru at some point? On his own, without prompting?"

"If... we were to swear loyalty to the general, he'd probably think it was all right to give her back. He'd believe that even if he returned her to us, we wouldn't betray him. ...I dunno. It seems like a stretch. I can't see it happening that way."

"Yeah. If you think about it, it's not likely that our relationship with the general would change that much."

"...And he's not an idiot, so he has to know that. Unless something happens that upends everything, we're not ever going to be his loyal followers."

"We only do what he says because he's threatening us. The general has few pawns at his disposal, so he has to use us. What if... that changes?"

"Since we can't be trusted, it's... unlikely he'd keep using us. The general probably doesn't genuinely believe he can win us over. Once he doesn't need us, we'll be cut loose. I think we're just a stopgap."

It was probably safe to assume that Neal and the Black Cloaks were one and the same as Jin Mogis. They shared some sort of special bond which transcended love, friendship, loyalty, responsibility, or anything like that.

This was only speculation, but the battles against the barbarian tribes in the south of the kingdom must have been incredibly harsh. The general had saved them, and they gave him everything in return. They had survived together. After an experience like that, perhaps they had a sense of solidarity that transcended reason.

Here in the frontier, the general would struggle to find subordinates who could act as his hands and feet. However, there had to be those who would

work with him if their interests aligned.

“I don’t know why, but Hiyo... the master of the Forbidden Tower is siding with the general. I wonder what happened with Io and her group. We haven’t seen them since they went with Hiyo...”

“Io is a priest,” Merry said quietly. “One of the best in the Volunteer Soldier Corps. Her personality takes some adjusting to, but she’s highly capable.”

“I’m sure that, setting their weird names aside, Gomi and Tasukete are no slouches, either.”

“I agree.”

“Hiyo is... I wonder. She seems pressured. She’s acting awfully serious, and even exposing herself to danger. Maybe her position isn’t so stable, either.”

“If she doesn’t give everything she has to their operations, she’ll be displaced by Io’s party...?”

“I think she might feel threatened, maybe. This is just an example, but what if the master of the Forbidden Tower were to order Io, Gomi, and Tasukete to assist the general, too...”

“Then our relative usefulness would go down,” Setora, who had been quiet up until now, suddenly interjected with a cynical snort. “In other words, our position is not so stable, either.”

Kiichi roused himself and stretched, shaking his head. He sat and looked up at Setora.

Setora looked down at Kiichi. The moment she did, her expression relaxed.

“Ngh...” Kuzaku groaned. He rubbed his face and neck with his hand. Had he woken up? No, apparently not. Kuzaku went right back to snoring.

“This man...” Setora looked at Kuzaku with exasperation. The difference from when she’d been looking at Kiichi was incredible.

Should they shake Kuzaku awake, and take action immediately? Emotionally, that was what Haruhiro wanted to do. But was there anything they could do?

“Rescuing Shihoru.” Haruhiro jabbed his right index finger against the ground.

“That’s our first priority.”

“In terms of our options... if negotiation isn’t possible, I think there are, broadly speaking, two things we can do.” Merry gently placed the tip of her own index finger on the ground, too. “The first is to find out where Shihoru is, and save her.”

“And the other?” Setora picked Kiichi up. Kiichi seemed to be enjoying it as she patted his neck and back.

“We do to them what they did to us. Take the general hostage, and demand Shihoru be released in exchange for him. I wouldn’t call either option peaceful, but we’re left with no other choices. They were the ones who started this.”

They couldn’t afford to fail. First, they had to choose which method had the higher certainty of success. If they were going to do it, they had to succeed. Haruhiro tapped his finger on the ground as he racked his brain.

“...Even if we manage to take the general hostage, there’s no guarantee we’ll be able to get Shihoru back. I can’t even get a read on if the man values his own life or not. Lately, we’re only called when he needs us for something, so there are also not that many chances to approach him.”

“The Expeditionary Force will be turning the hi’irogane over to the goblins in the near future.” Setora began walking around while still holding Kiichi. “That woman... Hiyo will be present for it, I’m sure. What about the general?”

“The general won’t show himself until the time comes for him to meet Mogado Gwagajin personally, don’t you think?” Merry suggested. “They’ll arrange a place in the Old City for the meeting. If we can find Shihoru before then, we’ll have a chance.”

Setora nodded.

“When the general and Mogado Gwagajin meet face to face, security here will be stretched thin. Not just in Tenboro Tower, but Alterna as a whole.”

Haruhiro was starting to see what they needed to do.

First, hunt for Shihoru. Search inside Tenboro Tower, as well as Alterna, while taking care not to arouse the general’s suspicion. He’d go to the thieves’ guild in

West Town, and if Mentor Eliza was there, he could seek her assistance.

There was no need to outright discard the option of taking the general hostage. If he kept tabs on when it was possible to make contact with him, they would be able to act when the time came.

For now, though, Haruhiro decided to sleep until morning.

Exploring the New City had been really taxing. On top of that, despite accomplishing his task, he hadn't gotten the result he wanted. He was disappointed, to say the least. Haruhiro wasn't blessed with an especially strong psyche. He was ordinary. But it would also be weird for him to become totally depressed over his failure. Though Merry had healed his wounds with magic, that didn't restore the blood he'd lost, so he was exhausted. If he didn't recover, body and soul, he couldn't save Shihoru.

16. They Appeared Like the Wind

He managed to meet with Eliza. Not that she showed her face, though. Regardless, once he told her the situation, she agreed to help search for Shihoru.

However, as a mentor in the thieves' guild, Eliza had a job to do, too. She was attached to the Volunteer Soldier Corps. Her work required her to travel back and forth between Alterna and Riverside Iron Fortress, which they were currently occupying. Therefore, there was a limit to how much she could do inside Alterna.

"The Volunteer Soldier Corps doesn't know that Jin Mogis is trying to join hands with the goblins yet, so I have to go tell them first. I expect that will cause some discord. Maybe a lot."

How would the Volunteer Soldier Corps react if the Expeditionary Force and the goblin race formed an alliance? Not even Eliza could predict that. However, the Volunteer Soldier Corps couldn't afford to be completely isolated, either. Even if Mogis was working with the goblins, they might still find themselves forced to coordinate with him. Naturally, Mogis knew this, and was moving forward with that outcome in mind.

Furthermore, in regards to what Shinohara of Orion had said about Mount Grief, it seemed that the remnants of the Southern Expedition were, in fact, gathering there. Though they were "remnants," there were roughly three thousand kobolds from Riverside Iron Fortress and around five hundred orcs from Deadhead Watching Keep, along with a considerable number of undead that had already been at the mountain. It was a formidable force.

"Mount Grief may be the key now," Eliza said.

For Mogis and the Volunteer Soldier Corps, the forces at Mount Grief were clearly the enemy. Normally, the goblins would have been on the other side, too, but their alliance with Mogis was essentially a withdrawal from the Alliance of Kings.

It seemed unlikely that the goblins would fight against the forces at Mount Grief. However, it was entirely possible they would remain neutral.

The Volunteer Soldier Corps wanted to eliminate the enemies at Mount Grief due to their proximity to Riverside Iron Fortress. If Mogis lent them a hand, it would strengthen the ties between them.

Haruhiro and Kiichi evaded the watchful eyes of Neal and the Black Cloaks to begin the search inside Tenboro Tower. They searched every nook and cranny of the first floor, which contained the entrance hall, storage area, and the room that had been assigned to them, plus the second floor where the great hall, reception room, dining hall, kitchen, and fireplace room were. Everything from the third floor up was a literal tower. The security around Jin Mogis's bedroom on the third floor was too tight for them to even approach it, but they searched the rest. It looked like the other rooms were all unoccupied and unused.

They split up to search throughout Alterna, but had no more success there.

Alterna could be divided into the northern district and the southern district, with Tenboro Tower in roughly the center. The high ground in the east was called East Town, and the lower western block was called West Town.

Soldiers of the Expeditionary Force were currently staying in the former headquarters of the Frontier Army, the lodgings in Flower Garden Street, the pleasure quarter in Celestial Alley, and the craftsmen's town in the southern district. Apparently Mogis had given orders to that effect.

There were soldiers positioned on the walls, but inside the city there was only the occasional Black Cloak on patrol. Sometimes soldiers who were slacking off from their jobs clearing debris or repairing buildings might wander by, too. Not many of them, though. Hardly any soldiers ventured outside the living area Mogis had designated for them.

If there were no soldiers around certain places, contrary to what one might expect, it might have been easier to hold Shihoru there. That was one way of looking at it. However, Mogis and his Expeditionary Force weren't at all familiar with the city. Could they really find a well-thought-out place to lock Shihoru up in?

Haruhiro tried investigating the angle that Anthony Justeen, formerly of the

Kingdom of Arabakia's Frontier Army, might have helped the abductors. But when he crossed paths with the man inside Tenboro Tower, before Haruhiro could even bring up the subject, Anthony was already suspicious about Shihoru's disappearance, and was worried for her. It was possible he could have been acting, but Haruhiro found it hard to imagine Anthony was secretly aiding the general.

Maybe Shihoru wasn't in the northern or southern districts after all.

The looting and destruction had hit the cozy mansions of East Town extremely hard, and there was no chance of the area being repaired any time soon. After a cursory search, Haruhiro found nothing moving there beyond bugs and mice.

West Town, where the dread knights' and thieves' guilds were, was a slum, made up of complicated and interweaving streets. Even if you were just taking an ordinary walk, it was easy to get lost there. Haruhiro had Eliza help with searching that part of town, but he didn't have much hope of turning anything up.

Four days after Haruhiro managed to infiltrate Ahsvasin, the handover of the hi'irogane equipment took place.

Here's how it went. The Expeditionary Force carried the hi'irogane equipment to the wall that divided the Old City of Damuro from the New City. Then they pulled back. The goblins came out of the New City and checked the items.

It seemed the goblins knew precisely what hi'irogane items there were, and how many of each. If even one was missing, there was going to be trouble. Fortunately, all of the hi'irogane equipment was returned, and the exchange was completed without incident.

The goblins set up a meeting place in the Old City, and the Expeditionary Force investigated it. By the day that the items were handed over, they had already completed a building that looked like half a mud dumpling. Weird by human standards of architecture.

Haruhiro and his group were sent out to go over the building with a fine-toothed comb, but they found nowhere that the goblins might be hiding ambushers inside. There were no other strange tricks, either. Though the building had a skylight, the only other opening was the door, so there wasn't

any risk of snipers targeting the participants with ranged weapons from outside.

The next day, Jin Mogis would reorganize the Expeditionary Force into the Frontier Army, and take the title Commander of the Frontier Army.

Then, he would meet with Mogado Gwagajin in the Old City of Damuro at noon, and the Frontier Army would forge a formal alliance with the goblins.

Was he planning to celebrate the night before? Mogis called all of the soldiers, except for those on wall duty, to the plaza outside Tenboro Tower, set a large bonfire, and served generous amounts of alcohol.

He slaughtered a number of ganaroes, those large beasts of burden, and fried them whole, while boiling the rice they had brought from the mainland in pots with a variety of ingredients. The barrels of booze that seemed to invite everyone to drink to their hearts' content contained watered-down spirits that had been pumped full of spice. They tasted and smelled awful, but the soldiers were somehow convinced that the brew was healthy for them.

The soldiers were given plates, bowls, and mugs made of wood or crude pottery. Haruhiro and his group ended up sitting with the soldiers, and had to wait to be served with them. Neal the scout and his subordinates were watching them, so unfortunately they had no choice but to participate in this off-color celebration.

There were a good number of empty barrels and boxes scattered around the plaza. Apparently they were expected to use them as tables.

Haruhiro sat around an empty barrel with Kuzaku, Merry, Setora and Kiichi, eating bowls of some kind of gruel. It didn't taste bad, as much as he hated to admit it, and the skewer of meat Kuzaku was chowing down on looked tasty, too. He might not be able to convince himself to try the booze, but the food had done him no wrong. He'd be fine so long as he didn't stuff himself to the point it impaired his ability to move around.

Maybe a chance would come their way.

Mogis gave a speech, and they expected he would leave after that, but instead he sat at a table in front of Tenboro Tower's front gate and watched the soldiers. Though there were drinks prepared, he had barely touched them so

far. He had four Black Cloaks guarding him. There were likely a number more inside Tenboro Tower.

Haruhiro and Kiichi had almost run out of places to search in there.

But only *almost*. Not completely.

They hadn't ever been able to enter Mogis's room on the third floor.

Anthony Justeen tried to talk to them, but they brushed him off, and he left, looking lonely.

"Enjoying yourselves?" Neal came over carrying a wooden mug. "What? You're not drinking? We're celebrating before we all set out again tomorrow. Why don't you let loose a little?"

"You're sober, too, aren't you?" Kuzaku said, making no attempt to hide his distaste for the man.

Neal brought the mug to his lips, and made a show of drinking from it.

"No matter how much I drink, it never shows on my face. I'm like a sieve."

"Is that really even alcohol...?"

"You want to test it?"

Neal brought the mug to Kuzaku's nose, smirking.

"I won't let you tell me you can't drink my booze."

"Well, that's exactly what I'm gonna say." Kuzaku enunciated every syllable as he said, "I can't drink your booze."

Neal laughed and withdrew the mug, instead giving Kuzaku a friendly slap on the shoulder.

"Hey, let's play nice."

"I don't wanna!"

Kuzaku twisted, and brushed Neal's hand away. Neal not only wasn't offended, he apparently found it hilarious.

"Don't hate me so much, Brother. We're all in this together. Right?"

"Yeah," Haruhiro replied instantly. "That's right."

The words may have sounded hollow, but he didn't care. Neal wasn't sincere, either.

"Enjoy yourselves," Neal said and then left.

The party was being monitored by Neal and his subordinates, a total of four men. Haruhiro had a clear memory of each of their faces. But the scouts were busy, too. Many of them were posted to Damuro now. Only Neal and one of the others was in the plaza now. When Neal wasn't looking their way, the other man was watching what Haruhiro and the others did.

While they'd been dealing with Neal, Mogis had left his seat. Had he gone back to Tenboro Tower? No, that wasn't it. He was walking around the plaza. The Black Cloaks were with him.

Jin Mogis wasn't the kind of commander who could strike up a friendly conversation with his men. Most of them actually avoided him. Some even fled when Mogis approached.

There had once been a large number of soldiers who were blatantly underestimating what Mogis was capable of. However, once he took Alterna, they must have reevaluated their opinions of him. There was still no shortage of men who couldn't abide by military protocol, but even the most slothful of them feared him. Talking back to their commanders was one thing, but defying Mogis himself was another. He was the kind of man who would lop their heads off without hesitation.

There were even signs of affirmative, even passionate, support for Mogis from a number of the troops.

"Here's to General Jin Mogis!"

"It's not General, it's Commander now!"

"That's right! We're not the Expeditionary Force anymore! We're the Frontier Army!"

"To Commander Jin Mogis!"

"Hail the Commander!"

"Take the throne, Commander!"

“Be our king!”

“Take Vele! Go for it, Commander!”

“The frontier is our homeland now!”

Did Mogis enjoy being surrounded by the boisterous young soldiers lifting up their drinks in his honor? His expression was the same as ever. But he didn’t raise a hand to stop them from cheering. Nor did he show any sign of disliking it. From Mogis’s perspective, things were going as planned, and he could breathe a sigh of relief for now.

“*Sigh...*” Kuzaku scowled as he bit into his meat skewer, and chewed it loudly. “This’s making the meat taste bad.”

“Just how much do you plan to eat?” Setora said, setting her bowl down on the empty barrel they were using in place of a table. Kuzaku cocked his head to the side.

“Well, I figured I’d eat all I could, you know? Something like that. Maybe I’ll go get another two or three. Anyone else want one? I’ll get some for everybody while I’m there.”

“I’ll pass,” Merry replied politely, but Setora just shook her head. Kiichi, meanwhile, looked up at Kuzaku expectantly.

“Oh, you want one, Kiichi? I see. I see. You, Haruhiro?”

“I...” *Don’t want one*, Haruhiro was about to reply, but felt a sensation like all of the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end.

“Heya.”

Haruhiro was shocked to realize he hadn’t even noticed the man’s presence until he spoke.

He turned to see a man wearing a black cloak that covered his whole body, with the hood pulled low over his eyes. That wasn’t all. His face was covered with some sort of mask, too.

“Erm...”

Before he could ask, *Who are you?* Merry gulped.

Haruhiro hid his confusion, and looked around, trying to act like nothing was out of the ordinary. Neal was fifteen meters away, and the other scout was with Mogis. They were both looking this way.

But did it matter? Wasn't the masked man in a blind spot for both of them? They likely hadn't spotted him.

Was that coincidence? Or had he deliberately made contact while avoiding their watchers?

"You don't get it, huh?" The masked man chuckled in a low voice. "I hear you've lost your memory, Haruhiro. ...On a completely unrelated note, don't you need to go take a piss?"

Before Haruhiro could respond, the masked man turned to go.

He was beyond quick. In no time flat, the man slipped into the crowd, and was gone.

Haruhiro and the rest of the party all looked at one another.

"Um, I've, uh, gotta go..." Haruhiro mumbled, making a gesture to indicate he was going to go heed nature's call. Obviously, he didn't actually have any pressing need to urinate. His comrades understood that.

"Ohh... Sure, okay!" Kuzaku said with an exaggerated nod, and Setora sighed as she watched him.

Merry's mind seemed to be elsewhere. Was that because, unlike Haruhiro and the others, she remembered?

When Haruhiro left his wooden plate on the empty barrel and left, Neal moved, too. He likely meant to leave monitoring Kuzaku and the rest to the scout who was with Mogis, while he tailed Haruhiro personally. But he'd chosen the wrong guy to try to follow. Haruhiro used Stealth to ditch Neal. He left the plaza, and before he had time to consider where he ought to go, his feet were already leading him to the volunteer soldier lodging house.

The masked man was waiting for Haruhiro inside one of the rooms there.

"Do you really not remember anything?"

"...Why? What do you ask that for?"

“Because you came to this room without hesitating.”

The man removed his mask, and pulled back his hood.

Haruhiro could at least make out his features in the moonlight that streamed in through the window.

“It’s true. You don’t remember.”

“...Uh, yeah?”

The man threw his mask down on the bed, and started scratching at his hair in irritation.

“You know who I am, right?”

“Yeah. I’ve got a good idea.”

“A good idea, you say? Do you want me to kill you, man?”

“Nope.”

“Even without your memories, you still have the same stupid, lame responses as ever.”

“Ranta.”

What was he supposed to say? How was he supposed to say it?

“Long time no see.”

With nothing coming to him, he went for something inoffensive. It was true, he was boring. He had to accept that.

Ranta hung his head.

“Is that something a guy with no memories should say? You idjit...” Ranta said, trailing off as he lost momentum.

It seemed he and Ranta hadn’t necessarily been on good terms. Actually, they’d gotten along quite badly. They wouldn’t have gone their separate ways otherwise.

The guy had a real mouth on him. Haruhiro could tell that even from this short exchange with him. Was that why he’d disliked Ranta? It couldn’t have been that simple. There had to be something about each of them that the other

couldn't accept. But they'd still been comrades. They'd gone through many hardships together before parting ways.

"Don't call me an idiot, you moron."

For some reason, the words slipped out on their own.

Ranta looked up, his eyes widening for a moment, then he turned to look down again.

"I didn't call you an idiot. I called you an idjit. Get it straight."

"...Aren't they the same?"

"They're different, duh. It's idjit and idiot."

"It's way too minor a difference, if you ask me."

"That sort of nuance is pretty important, man. You get it? Yeah, no, you don't. You're sloppy, Parupiro. That's the problem with guys like you."

"Listen... I dunno what this difference in nuance you're on about is, but I think I can see why I didn't get along with you."

"Because I'm sensitive, and you're sloppy. We're like water and oil. Nah, like the moon and a turtle. By the way, in this analogy, I'm the moon, and you're the turtle."

If Haruhiro said one thing, Ranta would come back at him with ten. He was different from Setora, who was argumentative and sharp-tongued. The guy couldn't stop running his mouth. If Haruhiro tried to respond to everything, it'd be pretty exhausting.

"I heard you were with the Volunteer Soldier Corps."

It seemed wise to just ignore him and move things along.

"Did you quit and leave on your own?"

"Like hell I did. I heard Shihoru got kidnapped, and... I mean, I don't really care, but, you know, *she* does, so—"

Just as Haruhiro was about to ask who Ranta meant, something sprang at him from behind.

“Haru-kun...!”

“Whaa?!”

What was this? A piggyback ride? Haruhiro was giving someone a piggyback ride? Someone who jumped on him, out of nowhere? No, no, that wasn't it. They were just clinging to him on their own. Haruhiro hadn't put his arms behind himself to support them. He was adjusting his balance to keep from falling over. Should he throw them off? But *Haru-kun*? Wait, what?

“Haru-kun! It's Haru-kun! You smell like Haru-kun! It's Haru-kun...!”

“No, hold on, hey...!”

They were smelling him. With their nose pressed against his neck, behind his ear, sniffing like crazy. Was it a dog? No. Obviously not.

“Hey, Yume, stooooop...!” Ranta was trying to tear whoever it was off of Haruhiro. “What do you think you're doing, you moron?! Get off!”

“Noooo! Yume hasn't been with Haru-kun in forever!”

“You haven't ‘been with’ him? People are gonna misunderstand if you word it like that, okay?! Besides, have you ever snuggled up to Haruhiro like that before?!”

“Yume has!”

“You have?! No way! Seriously?!”

“It was a long time ago, but Haru-kun hugged Yume real tight!”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever! That was forever ago! And let me tell you, this piece of shit doesn't remember it at all! Do you get that?!”

“Even if Haru-kun's forgotten Yume, maybe his body remembers!”

“I told you, people will misunderstand if you say stuff like that...!”

“U-Umm...” Haruhiro struggled to speak.

It hurts.

Ranta tried to pull Yume off him, and Yume — yes, it was Yume — was clinging onto Haruhiro. She had her arms wrapped tight around his neck,

digging into it, so he couldn't breathe properly.

"H-Help! L-Let go of me...!"



“Wh-Whaa! Sorry!”

Yume jumped back and away from him, stopping him from suffocating, at the last possible moment.

He squatted and tried to catch his breath, and Yume rubbed his back as he did.

“You okay? Sorry. Yume was just so darn happy to see you, Haru-kun.”

“What’re you so happy to see this snot-nosed idiot for, stupid? Don’t make such a big deal about it, you loose woman.”

Ranta seemed awfully mad. Yume snapped at him.

“Yume’s not a loser!”

“I never said you were! I said you were loose!”

“Hrrm?” Yume cocked her head to the side, and her hair, which despite being braided was still very long, touched the floor. “What’s that supposed to mean? Yume’s all muscle, so if anything, she’s tight?”

“Oh, forget it! I don’t even know anymore!”

“...Are you two always like this?” Haruhiro asked after clearing his throat, and Ranta started to panic.

“L-L-L-Like what? What do you mean by that, huh?!”

“Well, yeah. We’re always actin’ like this.” Yume confirmed with a sigh. Ranta seemed kind of embarrassed.

“...It’s true, we’re always kind of like this. Joking around, or whatever, you know? It’s nothing more than that, so don’t get any weird ideas, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah...” Haruhiro responded without any emotion, and Ranta snapped.

“One ‘yeah’ is enough! One! Since the dawn of the universe, everyone has known that—”

“Oh, yeah!”

When Yume suddenly sprang to her feet, Ranta let out a little shriek and jumped back and away from her.

“Wh-Wh-What’s this about, all of a sudden?!”

“Shihoru’s been kidnapped, right? We came here to meet Haru-kun and everyone, but we came to rescue Shihoru, too, didn’t we? Huh?”

“...Y-Yeah. Right. Th-That’s right!”

Ranta pointed at Haruhiro.

“That’s right, Parupororon!”

“Who’s Parupororon supposed to be...?”

“Who would it be but you? No one, right? Don’t you get it? Is your head that empty?”

“...Don’t we need to talk about Shihoru?”

“We will! You don’t need to tell me that! I mean, you talk! Explain the damn situation. Out with it. Keep it short and to the point. Hurry up!”

If Ranta were the only one here, Haruhiro might have refused to talk out of sheer stubbornness. It was a good thing Yume was around.

He’d heard from Merry that Yume and Shihoru were relatively close. Shihoru had lost her memories. That had to be shocking enough for Yume on its own. Now, she was missing, too. Yume had left the Volunteer Soldier Corps to come to Alterna because she couldn’t sit still anymore. And she’d brought Ranta with her. Ranta was just a tagalong.

“...And I think that’s everything. For now.”

When Haruhiro explained Shihoru’s current situation, Yume had to sit down on the bed for a moment. Ranta crossed his arms and chewed on his thumb.

“...Oh, this is a real fun situation. No, Yume, I did not mean that literally, okay? Don’t attack me. I was just trying to sound cool. Wait, if I explain it, it defeats the purpose...”

Yume was still hanging her head. She wasn’t even hearing Ranta’s nonsense. Ranta clicked his tongue, and glared at Haruhiro.

“So? What’re you gonna do?”

“Do?”

Haruhiro looked down, and averted his eyes.

“...Wait for an opportunity, then search Jin Mogis’s bedroom.”

“And what if Shihoru’s not there, either? I can’t see him hiding a hostage somewhere so obvious.”

“Well... maybe you’re right.”

“How about the Forbidden Tower?”

“Huh?”

“Mogis is working with Hiyomu’s... I guess I can just call her Hiyo, huh? Anyway, he’s working with her master. If he’s the owner of the Forbidden Tower, like you say...”

“...Oh. If he leaves the hostage... Shihoru with the master of the Forbidden Tower for safekeeping...”

“There’s no getting inside the tower. I mean, there’s probably a way, but we don’t know it. That’d make finding and saving her impossible from the get-go.”

“I...” Haruhiro sat down next to Yume. “...I never thought of that.”

“Well, that’s because you’ve got shit for brains, moron.” Ranta smirked. “You were always a downer, thinking about things in the most negative way possible. Does it make it easy for you, creating an out for yourself like that?”

“Could you not say that like you understand? ...Honestly, it’s unpleasant.”

“Do I get anything out of making things pleasant for you?”

“What do you get out of harassing me?”

Ranta shrugged. “It feels good. Only a little, though.”

“Ranta.”

It was a low voice. For Yume, at least. The coldness of it left more of an impression. It was scary. Haruhiro wasn’t the only one who got the chills from it.

“...Yipes!” Ranta said, sounding obviously frightened.

“Yipes,” *really?*

Haruhiro wanted to poke fun at him, but decided it was better not to.

“If you don’t stop picklin’, Yume’s gonna punish you, okay?”

“You mean—”

Ranta was probably about to say, *You mean bickering, not pickling*. But he didn’t. Maybe she had given him a serious scolding before? Yume was supposed to be pretty scary when she got mad.

“...A-Anyway. If you’ve got time for that, wouldn’t it be faster to just clobber this Mogis guy and make him let Shihoru go?”

“Clobber him?”

If Haruhiro took issue with every word Ranta used, they’d never get anywhere. Haruhiro more or less knew what he meant.

“...Well, I had considered taking Mogis hostage. It’s not that easy. He’s on guard against us, too.”

“Even with me and Yume here?” Ranta smirked and gave him a thumbs-up. “I’m sure you’ve forgotten, but I’m more reliable than a hundred other guys combined, okay?”

17. Check and Mate

Haruhiro left the volunteer soldier lodging house by himself to head back to the plaza. He meant to return to his comrades, but before he could get to them, he was discovered and waylaid by Neal.

“Where’d you take off to?”

“Went to take a piss.”

“You took your sweet time.”

“My stomach hurt.”

“You eat something that disagreed with you?”

Neal was being openly snide as he questioned him. Haruhiro frowned, and rubbed his belly.

“Yeah... Pretty much every day, you know?”

“You said it.”

Neal laughed and slapped Haruhiro on the shoulder. He wished the guy wouldn’t touch him so casually. But he could put up with this much. It was easy.

“Anyway, I’m gonna head back.”

“Sure.”

Neal didn’t follow him. No, that wasn’t quite true. Though he didn’t stick close to Haruhiro, he did tail him at a distance. When Haruhiro turned around and looked him in the eye, Neal put his hands up. He wasn’t even trying to hide that he was watching them. Nothing had really changed from before.

Kuzaku and the rest of the group had relocated to the edge of the plaza.

“So, some drunk soldiers tried to mess with Setora-san and Merry-san,” Kuzaku told him, sounding indignant. “I sort of went wild on them. I held back, though, obviously.”

“Scum...” Merry sounded more disheartened than angry, while Setora

seemed completely unfazed.

“Well?” she asked their leader.

“Yeah...” Haruhiro looked at each of his comrades. “I want you all to listen to me like you’re hearing the most boring story ever.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Now you’ve got me super interest—ow!” Kuzaku was interrupted by a blow to the jaw from Setora, and pouted unhappily. “...No, I get what he means. Even I’m not *that* dense. I was just kidding.”

“Talk to us like you’re telling the kind of worthless anti-humor that Kuzaku is prone to spouting, Haruhiro.”

“...Gotcha.”

Haruhiro disclosed the plan with the same cadence Kuzaku would use when telling a joke nobody would laugh at. Merry struggled to hide how it affected her when Yume’s name came up. The rest of the group, however, listened like they would have when someone told an unfunny joke.

“It’s not a matter of do or don’t,” Setora said, with a sigh that said she wanted nothing more to do with the nonsense he had just spewed. “It’s whether we end things here or not.”

“I agree,” Merry nodded.

“Ayup,” Kuzaku said, sounding extra goofy.

Kiichi let out a short, silly meow.

In the distance, they heard men exulting Jin Mogis.

“Jin Mogis!”

“To the Frontier Army!”

“We’re not the Expeditionary Force anymore!”

“Frontier Army! Frontier Army!”

“To Commander Mogis!”

“Mo-gis!”

The drunken soldiers chanted his name.

“Mo-gis!”

“Mo-gis!”

“Mo-gis!”

The voices spread outward like a wave through the whole plaza.

Mogis walked at a relaxed pace, with the Black Cloaks in tow.

Right now, there was only a single Black Cloak near the main gate to Tenboro Tower. He was looking in Mogis’s direction, too.

Neal and the scout who worked under him were watching Haruhiro and the rest of the group, as always.

While pretending to watch Mogis like he was in a daze, Haruhiro thought, *They’re in.*

Ranta and Yume had infiltrated Tenboro Tower. All according to plan. If there wasn’t an uproar by now, they had managed it without being detected by the Black Cloaks.

Mogis was headed to a table that had been specially prepared for him in front of the main gate. Though, it looked like he didn’t intend to sit there. Was it time for him to withdraw to Tenboro Tower? No, not that either. He stood in front of the gate, and turned to look back at the soldiers.

“Welcome to the frontier.”

His sonorous voice made every soldier fall silent.

Mogis arched his back, and spread his arms wide.

“I invite you all to think of what you stand to gain in this brave new land. Everything. Here, you will have everything you desire. The frontier is yours for the taking.”

“Mooooooooooooogis!” one soldier shouted.

With that catalyst, the fervor filling the plaza erupted.

“Mogis!”

“King Mogis!”

“Take the throne!”

“Mogis!”

“Long live Jin Mogis!”

“Long live Jin Mogis!”

Mogis nodded once, then turned to go.

He entered Tenboro Tower.

Three of the Black Cloaks who had been with him remained at the main entrance.

“Just one, huh?” Setora whispered.

“Ayup,” Kuzaku agreed with a goofy look on his face, and stretched. “Y’know. I’m feeling mighty tired. We’ve got stuff to do tomorrow, too. Besides, I’m already stuffed. Why don’t we get some shut-eye?”

“He has a point.” Merry looked at Haruhiro. “Why don’t we go back to our room?”

“Yeah.”

The party pushed their way through the excited crowd towards Tenboro Tower. Neal and his scout moved to follow them. They hadn’t lost sight of the group, but the crush of drunken soldiers delayed them a bit.

There were four Black Cloaks at the gate, including the one who had been there the whole time. It was questionable whether they were going to let them through easily.

As might have been expected, the Black Cloaks moved to block their way.

“We’re tired, and we want to go to sleep already,” Haruhiro said, maintaining his calm.

The Black Cloaks looked at one another. Kuzaku licked his lips. Even after having come this far, Haruhiro asked himself, *Is this okay?*

Yeah, this is okay.

“Here’s the thing about making a decision,” Ranta had lectured him in the lodging house. “Basically, you have to rank your priorities, and then accept you’ll have to give up on everything but the top one. Because, most of the time, you only get to choose one thing. You can’t be saying I want this, and I want that.”

He couldn’t force himself to like Ranta. That had probably been true before Haruhiro lost his memory, too.

“Haruhiro, what’s the most important thing to you right now? What should we do?”

Why should I have to do what you tell me to? Haruhiro couldn’t help but let that feeling get in his way.

“You’re the leader, aren’t you?”

But Ranta said this to Haruhiro:

“If you make a decision, whatever it is, we’ll follow it. So don’t be indecisive. Show us the way. You do that, and we’ll carry you to the destination.”

What the hell, man?

How can you sound so reliable?

You’re Ranta, damn it!

One of the Black Cloaks gestured with his chin. They all cleared the way. That apparently meant, *Let them through.*

The group entered Tenboro Tower through the main gate and headed for their room. Or, they made it look that way, and instead checked the stairs to the second floor. There were no Black Cloaks.

The ones at the main gate were looking outside.

Haruhiro indicated the stairs with his eyes. The others nodded.

What’s most important? My comrades. Obviously. We’re going to save Shihoru. That’s top priority.

Their relationship with Jin Mogis was complicated, and tied to the interests of the Volunteer Soldier Corps, too. On top of that, regardless of whether or not he deserved the title, Haruhiro was a mentor in the thieves’ guild. He needed to

refrain from rash actions. If he thought everything through, he was forced to come to that conclusion.

He was being controlled. Mogis had probably seen through him. He knew Haruhiro couldn't commit to taking action. He couldn't make decisions. Mogis saw him as weak and indecisive. And, pathetically enough, he was right. Without Ranta to goad him into action, Haruhiro would have been unable to move, only able to take things as they came.

The group climbed the stairs. There was no turning back now. He had no intention of doing so, either.

When they reached the second floor, the masked man was waiting. Yume was, too.

"...!"

When Merry saw Yume, she covered her mouth with both hands. Yume's eyes sparkled, and she waved both hands at her.

Haruhiro walked up to the masked man and whispered, "Take that thing off."

"Eat me. ...We searched that guy's room, but nothing."

"Where's Mogis?"

"He definitely didn't go up to the third floor."

"The fireplace room, maybe?"

"Wherever he is, we've got to do this fast."

"Yeah."

Haruhiro tried to proceed. His legs wouldn't move. Before Haruhiro could say anything, Ranta voiced his concern for him.

"Security's loose. Does that bother you?"

"...Well, yeah."

"If we're gonna back out, now's the time."

"We're... not going to."

"Can't you say that more confidently?"

“Oh, shut up.”

With a grin hidden beneath his mask, Ranta jabbed Haruhiro in the shoulder.

They headed down the silent hall towards the fireplace room. There was no one else around. Whenever Mogis was in the fireplace room, a Black Cloak was posted at the door. There wasn't one now. Just to be sure, he opened the door, and peered inside. The room was empty, like he'd thought.

That had to mean he was in the great hall.

The door to the great hall was wide open. That wasn't unusual. The doors were even fitted with a contraption that could be used to keep them from closing. But what did it mean that they were open *right now*?

“He's inviting us in,” Setora whispered.

That seemed like a safe assumption.

Mogis had probably expected Haruhiro to make a move. The remaining Black Cloaks would be guarding him, no doubt.

“It's no big deal,” Ranta suggested. “If we take the king, we win.”

Mogis wasn't supposed to know about Ranta and Yume. As far as he knew, it was just Haruhiro, Kuzaku, Setora, and Kiichi. Haruhiro exhaled.

“Let's go.”

“O Light, may Lumiaris's divine protection be upon you...”

Merry cast two light magic support spells, Protection and Assist, in quick succession.

Kuzaku took point as they barged into the great hall. Haruhiro, Ranta, Yume, Setora, Kiichi, and Merry followed.

Mogis was seated on the raised platform against the far wall, in the chair that resembled a throne. He was flanked by two Black Cloaks on each side. That made four of them in total. Less than expected.

“So you've come.” Mogis rose from his seat. The Black Cloaks tried to draw their swords. Mogis, however, would not allow it. He raised a hand to make them stop. He was coming down from the platform alone.

“Give Shihoru-san back...!” Kuzaku put his hand on the hilt of his large katana, then charged straight at Mogis. He looked ready to slice the man in two with the same motion he used to draw it.

Setora, Kiichi, and Merry followed Kuzaku.

Haruhiro used Stealth to approach from the left, while Ranta sprang to the right with moves like some sort of grasshopper. Yume was running after Ranta, taking aim with her bow, an arrow already nocked and ready.

Mogis drew his weapon. The same sword he always carried.

Kuzaku drew his large katana and immediately went for a diagonal slash.

“Hah...!”

“Ngh...!”

Mogis tried to dodge, but must have sensed he wouldn’t be able to get out of the way in time. Gripping his sword with both hands, he blocked Kuzaku’s large katana.

His body sank. Mogis dug in his heels as hard as he could, and managed to stop the large katana somehow, but Kuzaku was stronger.

With a “Yahh!” Mogis kicked Kuzaku in the stomach and forced him back.

“Gwah...!”

Kuzaku only retreated two steps. Mogis immediately took a swing at him, but Kuzaku easily parried it.

“That all you got?!”

“Grr...!”

Mogis used the momentum of the deflection to jump backwards.

Mogis had to have more experience. That made him tenacious. Even if Kuzaku could overwhelm him with sheer strength, Mogis might still hold out somehow. And if Kuzaku showed the slightest opening, he’d go on the counterattack. The moment Kuzaku thought he’d won would actually be the most dangerous.

I don’t know how this battle would play out.

If it were one on one.

But it's not.

Ranta was already trying to get Mogis. Yume had taken a knee. She could fire at any moment. Though it would depend on the situation, Haruhiro might be able to grapple Mogis, too. Merry would back them up with light magic. Even if Mogis took the unusual tactic of targeting Merry, Setora and Kiichi were there to protect her.

They had him cornered. Jin Mogis had nowhere to run. No hope of turning this around. Why had he stopped the Black Cloaks from approaching?

Even if they intervened, the result wouldn't be all that different. The Black Cloaks were battle-hardened soldiers, but that was all they were. Even if they all ganged up on Kuzaku, he wouldn't go down in a hurry. Ranta's moves were kind of bizarre, but he'd probably toy with them easily. There was something abnormal about Yume's swiftness and wild, beastly flexibility, too. Then they had Merry and Setora, on top of that. Even Kiichi could find unexpected ways to help. If this turned into a chaotic melee, Haruhiro could creep up behind Mogis and grapple him.

The battle was over before it began. Mogis refused to get the Black Cloaks involved because he knew they wouldn't be able to save him. He hadn't anticipated Ranta and Yume's power. He knew there was no winning this. Maybe if he had to go out, he wanted to look cool doing it.

Yeah, no.

Mogis raised his left hand in front of him.

"Nostarem sanguis sacrifici."

What did he say? Haruhiro didn't know. The words sounded unfamiliar to his ears. Like some sort of spell.

Mogis had the back of his left hand, not its palm, turned towards Kuzaku.

There was a ring on that index finger. It bore a whitish blue jewel, inlaid with a flower-like pattern.

That ring bothered Haruhiro. He probably hadn't been wearing it at first. He'd

gotten it after joining forces with Hiyo and the master of the Forbidden Tower, hadn't he? Had he borrowed it? Had he asked for it? Was it a gift? If so, was it just an ordinary ring?

"Ahh..." Haruhiro's voice escaped unbidden. He felt strange. If his body were to suddenly put on an extra ten or twenty kilos, it might have felt like this. But he felt like something had been taken from him, not given to him. It was a little like those times when he had bled too much. His body was lighter, and yet it felt heavier, more sluggish.

Yes. Something had been taken from Haruhiro. And not just him. From all of them.

Ranta almost tripped, and struggled to regain his footing. Yume hung her head and lowered her bow. Merry looked unsteady on her feet. Kiichi looked like a dog told to lie down, his tail flat on the ground. Kuzaku lost his balance, and fell flat on his backside.

Was it not just the party? The Black Cloaks on either side of the throne were leaning and crouching in strange positions.

It wasn't fully visible, but there was some sort of slight rippling, like a heat haze, hanging in the air. No, it wasn't so much hanging as flowing.

The haze was headed towards Jin Mogis. Was it flowing into him?

"Mmm..."

It happened in an instant.

Mogis stepped forward, and raised his sword.

Or to be more precise, the way Haruhiro saw it, Mogis lifted his sword from a low posture, then froze in place.

"Wahh...!"

On the floor, Kuzaku was trying to grab his right arm with his left hand. He couldn't. Because that right arm had been cut off.

"It's wonderful," Mogis whispered in a low voice, stretching his knee and swinging his sword like one would to get the blood off it.

“...!” Kuzaku let out a voiceless scream.

This time, it was his left arm.

Mogis had sent Kuzaku’s left arm flying to join his right.

He was fast. But it went beyond anything that words could describe. There was no way he could be so fast.

“Kuzaku...!” Merry tried to rush to his side. Haruhiro wanted to stop her. He didn’t make it in time.

It was like Mogis moved five or six meters in a single step. It should have been impossible, but that was how it looked.

“No...!” Haruhiro strained to speak. Even when he did, only a tiny voice came out.

Mogis’s sword ran through Merry’s abdomen.

“Guh...!”

What had Merry tried to say?

When Mogis effortlessly pulled his sword free, Merry crumpled to the ground. Mogis smiled.

“Incredible!”

Haruhiro had never seen a smile like this before.

What kind of feelings did it express? He couldn’t imagine. His eyes, his eyebrows, his nostrils, and his mouth were all pulled in different directions, then slackened, so that you could barely call it a smile at all. That was the kind of expression it was.

Mogis leaped. No one should have been able to jump like that. It was unbelievable. But Haruhiro had no choice but to believe.

“Augh...?! ”

First, Mogis kicked Ranta. It was too fast for Haruhiro to see it very well, but he’d probably landed the blow in between Ranta’s right shoulder and his neck. The mask slipped from his face, and Ranta didn’t so much fall to the ground as he was driven into it.

Then, in the next instant, Mogis planted a roundhouse kick on Yume.

“Nuh...!”

It looked like Yume tried to block it with her arm. If she hadn’t, it would have hit the side of her face. But, wait, had her arm just broken? It made an awful sound. She was also sent flying and tumbled to the floor.

Haruhiro could only look on in dumb amazement.

Setora, however, could do more. She took a jab at Mogis with her spear.

But Mogis was no longer there.

Mogis snapped the spear in his left hand. That Setora was able to release her spear and fall backwards at that very instant showed how impressive her reflexes were.

“...!”

As she tried to escape to the left or right, of all the things he could have done, Mogis stomped on her chest.

Kiichi let out an incredible yowl and pounced at Mogis.

“Do—”

Had Haruhiro ever been more painfully aware of how powerless his words were?

Don’t do it, was what he’d tried to say. You can’t do that. No, don’t. You absolutely can’t.

Without so much as looking at Kiichi, Mogis easily cut him to pieces.

“Ki—”

Setora’s words were powerless, too, and also cut off.

That was Mogis’s doing. He had shifted his sword to a backhand grip. Then, swinging down vertically, he pierced her throat.

“How many of you?”

Mogis turned to face Haruhiro, his foot still on Setora’s chest.

“How many of you do I have to kill before you’ll swear loyalty to me? If you do

so now, it will only have been one measly beast. The loss is minimal. With a priest's intervention, the others may yet survive. If you refuse—”

“...Raaah! Gwahhh...!”

Kuzaku, who had lost both arms, was still trying to rise. What was he going to do if he stood up? What could he possibly do?

Ranta was convulsing. It was that bad after just one kick?

Yume looked like her arms were broken. Both of them.

“O... Light... may Lumiaris's... divine protection... be upon you...”

Merry was trying to use Cure on herself. If she didn't heal her own wounds first, she wouldn't be able to save her comrades.

But if Mogis felt like it, he could kill Merry at any time.

If he did that, none of them would survive.

Haruhiro felt deeply terrified of the man.

It had to be deliberate.

Haruhiro alone was unharmed. Mogis hadn't done anything to him. Thanks to that, he felt his comrades' pain all the more keenly.

Honestly, for Haruhiro, this was far worse than if he had been on the brink of death himself.

“I get it.”

Haruhiro shook his head.

It's hopeless.

We can't refuse him.

The only option is to submit.

“I'll swear loyalty, whatever it takes. ...Don't kill them. Please, don't kill anyone.”

Mogis tut-tut-tutted. He was making his disappointment clear.

What more does he want?

Haruhiro got down on his knees, and lowered his head to the ground.

“...I pledge my loyalty. Please, don’t kill my comrades. ...I beg of you.”

“This is the last time.”

Jin Mogis finally lifted his boot from Setora’s chest.

“There will not be another.”



18. What I Didn't Know About You

Kuzaku, Merry, Setora, Ranta, and Yume were supplied with black equipment. Merry got a battle staff, Setora a spear and longsword, and Yume as many arrows as she needed.

Haruhiro had been wearing a black cloak to begin with, but the others were all ordered to wear them, too. Refusing wasn't an option. They had to do as they were told.

Before dawn, the military banner flying in Alterna had been exchanged for a new one. The new design bore a red moon and a sword on a black field.

The six o'clock bell rang.

The Expeditionary Force became the Frontier Army, and Jin Mogis became the Commander.

As the bell chimed for the second time, Hiyo dropped by Tenboro Tower. She was there to pay her respects to the Commander, and engage in some pleasant chatter over breakfast.

When the bell tolled for the third time, the Commander went out into Alterna with Hiyo, Neal the scout, and a hundred-odd Black Cloaks. They were scheduled to meet with the king of the goblins in the Old City of Damuro at noon. If the talks between Hiyo and the ugoths went off without a hitch, there would be an alliance between the Frontier Army and the goblin race in the name of Jin Mogis and Mogado Gwagajin.

"That bastard. Treating us like a bunch of fools..." Ranta grumbled while squatting in front of Tenboro Tower's main gate. He was wearing his usual mask, but it was shifted up to his forehead. If it was that much of a hindrance, he shouldn't have worn it at all.

"But still..." Kuzaku was leaning against the wall to the right of the gate, rubbing his arms with his hands. "We couldn't even lay a hand on him. If he treats us like fools, what can we say about it?"

“You idiot!” Ranta yelled at Kuzaku. It would have been nice if he’d presented some evidence before calling people idiots, but he probably didn’t have any. “You’re an idiot...” Ranta just repeated himself.

Setora was standing next to Kuzaku. She hadn’t said much since the night before. Even when they tried to talk to her, they could only get responses like, “Yeah,” or, “Mm-hm.”

Merry and Yume, who were standing close together on the left side of the gate, seemed to be in a daze. Like their souls had slipped out of their bodies.

Haruhiro wanted to kick Ranta, who was right next to him, in the back. He wouldn’t, though. Why was this guy the only one squatting? It pissed him off. But that anger was misdirected.

Haruhiro’s group had been ordered to guard Tenboro Tower. Basically, they were holding down the fort. Now, were they disappointed about missing the historic moment when an alliance would be forged between the human and goblin races? No, not in the slightest. Honestly, it didn’t matter to them, but they were being coerced. They weren’t devoted to Jin Mogis. The Commander had to know that, which was why they had been ordered to defend Tenboro Tower while he wasn’t around.

Now, Haruhiro wasn’t like Ranta, but he had to agree that they were being treated like fools.

Everything should have worked out, but their plans went awry. It had been a catastrophic failure. Not only did they fail to take Shihoru back, Kiichi had been killed. He was Setora’s pet, but Haruhiro had felt pretty attached to Kiichi, too. The nyaa had helped them out so much. It had felt natural for him to just be there. When he closed his eyes, he saw the moment Kiichi was cut to pieces. He felt a seething rage burning him from the inside. Haruhiro hated Jin Mogis. He feared him, too. What was that bizarre power? It wasn’t human. He could have massacred them. Why were they still alive?

The man had spared them. That was the only reason.

It shouldn’t have turned out that way.

If they set their minds to it, the party was capable of killing Jin Mogis at any

time. But that would have given rise to inconvenient complications, so they held off.

Except, that wasn't true. No, had it just ceased to be true?

"...The ring. Was it the power of that ring?"

It stuck out. The ring on Jin Mogis's left index finger. Yeah. Haruhiro was suspicious of it.

"It's a relic..."

"I'll bet," Ranta agreed with a laugh full of despair. "I've met my fair share of tough guys. But that was something else. Besides, there was something weird about it."

"What do you mean, weird?" Haruhiro asked, and Ranta turned to face him.

"Something instantly sapped my energy. Didn't you feel it? Or were you too dense to notice?"

"...I felt it. But, hold on, can we not have a conversation without you constantly deriding me?"

"Hey, I'm not doing it because I want to, okay? I've got to do it. I have no choice. You understand? If you don't want to get insulted, don't make me do it. Then you'll be happy that I'm not calling you out on your failings, and I'll be happy that I don't have to waste my breath. It's a win-win, really."

"There you go, making it all someone else's fault..." Haruhiro started to argue, but gave up. He sighed. It was time to calm down, and think. That was all he could do for now. "...Yeah. You're right. All of us got weaker... and the Black Cloaks who were there probably did, too. Did it feel to us like Mogis got stronger because of that...?"

"Nah," Ranta shook his head, then looked down. "...You can't explain what happened with it just being a feeling. He didn't just *look* fast. He *was* fast, and super strong, too... Did he gain as much strength as we lost...? Like, if we were to put a number on our power, we went from a ten down to an eight, or a seven, and that bastard used what we lost to power himself up... All the pieces fit if that's the case."

“No way...”

How could something so unfair happen?

But Haruhiro couldn't deny it was possible.

“A relic, huh? ...If he's got one, then Mogis is—”

“I dunno about that.” Ranta raised his face, glaring at the sky with upturned eyes. “Let's assume the ring is a relic, and it has the power I guessed. Do you think he got that relic by himself?”

“...I'm going to guess no. I'm sure that Hiyo... and the master of the Forbidden Tower gave it to him.”

“Okay, moving on. Now, assume I'm the master of the Forbidden Tower. Would I give him an item that made him invincible? Even if I was only lending it to him temporarily? He's not family, or a friend I trust to never betray me. Jin Mogis is ambitious, and clearly dangerous.”

“Well... I wouldn't give it to him at all.”

“There's got to be a hole in it somewhere, don't you think?”

“A hole...?”

“A flaw, I guess? A limitation, or some drawback... When did the effect wear off? By the time Merry healed me, I didn't feel weak anymore.”

Haruhiro touched his cheek. “...I honestly don't know. But it's true that he took us down in no time. Mogis left the great hall after that... When Merry healed me, I don't think my body felt heavy anymore, either.”

“The duration of the effect might be short. Can he use it repeatedly? If not, then he can only use it when it really counts. Could be why he lured us in. When we made our big gamble it was the perfect time for him to use the ring...”

“So, you're saying... we were dancing in the palm of his hand?”

“Because we didn't know what his cards were.”

Ranta stood up, and snapped his fingers.

“We had two pieces on the board, me and Yume, that he didn't know about, either. But we lacked the power to overcome his trump card — this time, at

least.”

Ranta turned and looked around behind him. Then, frowning, he let out a scornful laugh.

“You all look like such a bunch of sad sacks. It’s pathetic. I have to lead this bunch of gloomers to beat that piece of shit? This’s gonna be such a headache.”

“...Whuh?” Kuzaku stared blankly at Ranta.

“Lead...?” Merry had a dubious look on her face. Yume blinked repeatedly.

“...Oh?” Setora was impassive. Looking at Ranta without looking at him.

“I mean, obviously, it’s gotta be me.” Ranta pointed to the heavens, then jabbed his index finger into his own chest. “You think a sad, dejected, depressed, demotivated, weak coward can take you where you need to go?”

Who was that weak coward supposed to be?

Haruhiro, of course.

It was harsh, but he couldn’t get mad about it. There was no room for argument. Ranta was clearly trying to provoke Haruhiro. But Haruhiro couldn’t even fight back. Seriously, how could he? He didn’t have the will left to make excuses.

“You, too,” Ranta gestured to Kuzaku with his chin.

“And you.” And to Merry.

“And you, and you,” And to Yume and Setora, too.

“You’re all in more or less the same sad state. That’s the reason. If a loser leads a bunch of losers, that’ll just lead to an exponential growth in loser-ness, now won’t it?”

“No, but...” Kuzaku mumbled. Ranta laughed.

“Well, I’m different, okay?”

What a nasty grin.

Was he deliberately playing the heel? Or was he just so vile that he couldn’t be bothered to hide it?

“I’ve been through more battles than you can count. Seen every kind of hell. I’m not so tender that a little thing like this is gonna get me down. I mean, seriously. What are you all so bent out of shape over? If you ask me, it’s a little weird.”

“...Weird?” Haruhiro asked despite himself. “What’s so... weird about it? Look at the situation. Of course it’s normal for us to act this way.”

Ranta let out an exaggerated sigh.

“Even after losing your memories, you just never change, huh, Parupiro? It’s not like you’re the only one left...”

Not like he was the only one left?

What did Ranta mean by that? Haruhiro didn’t know. He could hardly imagine.

Haruhiro had heard the general outline of what caused the break between Ranta and him from Merry. But he didn’t understand it precisely. Not his feelings. Or Ranta’s. Ranta was supposed to have joined a group called Forgan centered around an orc named Jumbo. What happened after that? Why, or rather how, had he come back?

That was unclear, but what he did know was that Ranta must have been all alone for a time.

Even when Haruhiro awoke with no memories, he had been with his comrades. He hadn’t been alone, at least.

Obviously, he wasn’t now, either.

“What do you have to be depressed about?” Ranta grabbed Haruhiro’s chest, or rather his cloak. “Would you stop it with the pity party, you dolt? If you keep acting like that, then these losers are gonna stay like this forever. I’m saying, if you’re gonna be like this, it’d be better for me to drag the lot of you behind me. Got a problem with that?”



“A problem...”

“Well? Huh? I’m not sweet, and I’m not a nice guy, like you. But still. I won’t stop. I’ll keep on going. For as long as I live. What about you?”

Ranta was definitely not sweet, nor a nice guy.

You’re the leader, aren’t you? Then how about you do your damn job. If you can’t, you’re a failure. It’s time for you to quit. That had to be what Ranta was saying. It was a reasonable argument.

But Haruhiro was human, too. Though he was probably, no, definitely a mediocre one. There were times when it was hard for him. When he struggled, it was normal for him to want to break down. Couldn’t he do that? Did he have to pretend to be strong all the time?

That’s right, Ranta was pressing him. If you can’t do that, and can’t carry everyone on your back, you can step down.

Because I’ll do it for you.

“...You’re such a pain to deal with, man.”

“What? What’s this, all of a sudden?!”

Ranta was not a nice guy.

Was that really true?

He wasn’t sweet. But Ranta did think about his comrades in his own way.

“Were you always like this?”

“L-Like what?!”

“Did I just... always fail to understand you?”

“Huhhhhhh?!” Ranta pushed Haruhiro away. “Y-Y-You’re grossing me out, man! D-D-Did you lose your mind?! Well, you were crazy to begin with, but still...”

“I don’t need your concern,” Haruhiro said with a small, deliberate smile. When he thought about how Setora must feel, even that strained smile made his chest ache. Still, he couldn’t afford to wallow in defeat and sink into

depression like this. Mediocre or not, Haruhiro was their leader.

I want to be a leader.

Haruhiro had enough reason to think that.

He wasn't alone.

He never had been. Not before he lost his memories, and not since. Haruhiro hadn't been isolated.

That was how he'd survived until today.

Because he had comrades.

If he could lend them even a little strength by fulfilling his role as leader, he wanted to.

"Ranta."

"Wh-What?!"

"I don't plan on letting you take my place. Not while I'm still alive, at least."

"...Don't add that last negative part!"

"I have to consider the possibility. If anything happens to me, take care of everyone. You seem pretty tenacious. I can't see you kicking the bucket before me."

"Damn straight! Someday, I plan to become immortal and conquer the world!"

"That's some plan..." Kuzaku muttered with a spontaneous laugh, then hurriedly covered his mouth, glancing sideways at Setora.

Setora was looking at Haruhiro. She nodded slightly. *I understand. I'll be fine.* That was what she was trying to tell him.

She probably wasn't fine. How could she be? But Setora didn't want him to worry about her. Regrets and laments weren't going to help, but she still couldn't resist the sadness and feelings of emptiness that were assailing her. That had to frustrate her more than anyone.

When Haruhiro nodded back, the corners of her lips turned up slightly.

The bell began to toll.

“It’s noon, huh?” Yume looked up into the sky.

Before it was taken by the Southern Expedition, the bells in Alterna had rung once every two hours, from six o’clock in the morning, to six at night. Now that Jin Mogis’s Expeditionary Force had become the Frontier Army and he had become the Commander, the bells had been brought back.

“It’s about time,” Merry said.

If things were going as planned, Jin Mogis and Mogado Gwagajin were meeting at the site in the Old City of Damuro now. There would be an alliance between the Frontier Army and the goblin race.

“What’s his next move?” Ranta was trying to make him think ahead. By doing so, he put the pressure on Haruhiro. It felt like he was being repeatedly kicked in the butt, which made it hard to relax. But maybe that was good. Compared to the situation they found themselves in, Haruhiro was far too ordinary. He needed to put in two, or even three, times as much effort as someone else would have if he wanted to get anywhere. He didn’t really want to, but with Ranta on his ass, he had no choice. That was probably for the best.

“Next will be... Mt. Grief, I guess?”

“In that case, we—” Ranta started to say, then shut his mouth.

Yume looked at the plaza in front of Tenboro Tower.

“It’s Orion,” she said.

“Huh?” Haruhiro followed Yume’s gaze. There was a line of people in white cloaks walking through the plaza. There had to be more than twenty of them. The man at the head of the group raised his hand to wave at them.

“...Shinohara-san.”

For a moment, Haruhiro was confused.

Shinohara had brought Orion to Tenboro Tower while Mogis was away. How was he supposed to interpret that? Shinohara was a central figure in the Volunteer Soldier Corps. Ranta and Yume had been with them until yesterday, too. Shinohara more or less knew the situation. The Volunteer Soldier Corps

and the Frontier Army weren't hostile to each other at the moment. They were cooperating. That meant Shinohara, naturally, was not an enemy. He should have been a trustworthy ally.

And yet, Haruhiro felt a vague sense of unease.

Shinohara and his people stopped in front of the main gate.

"Hayashi..." Merry murmured.

"Yeah," one of the men of Orion replied in a low voice. He must have been Merry's former comrade, Hayashi.

Shinohara looked at each of them.

"I can see you made your move, and failed."

"We ran into an unexpected situation," Ranta said sulkily, and turned to look away. "The bastard had a relic. The thing was ridiculous."

When they heard the word 'relic,' the men and women of Orion started chattering.

"Did he?" Shinohara seemed calm. Did it sound too far-fetched? "A relic. He's gained power, too, then. We'll need to work with him for the time being, after all."

"Um."

When Haruhiro addressed him, there was a momentary smile.

Most likely, Shinohara started to smile, and then stopped himself.

"What is it?"

"...Uh, well. What are you doing here? Jin Mogis is meeting Mogado Gwagajin. We're the only ones at Tenboro Tower. Why are there so many of you?"

"We thought we'd wait for his return, and celebrate his new title." Shinohara did smile this time. "Obviously, our blessings are not unconditional, nor heartfelt. We know your situation. I don't blame you for taking action. If I were in your position, I might have done the same. I do wish you had consulted me first, but it's not as though I was nearby. Regardless..." Shinohara put his hands

on Haruhiro's shoulders. "I am glad that you are still alive, and I could meet you."

"Well..." Haruhiro glanced over at Setora. She lowered her eyes, a pensive look on her face. "...So, you're just paying your regards to Mogis? Couldn't you do that on your own, Shinohara-san?"

"If the Frontier Army and the goblins join forces, that will pave the way for an assault on Mt. Grief. That will likely take the form of a combined attack by the Volunteer Soldier Corps and the Frontier Army."

"You're putting in the request?"

"I feel we need to do more to get close to the Frontier Army. I had hoped you would be the bridge, but I overestimated you."

Shinohara released Haruhiro's shoulders, then grabbed them again.

"I ended up causing you pain as a result. I regret that."

"That's, well..."

What was this slight chill he felt? Now that he thought about it, this might have been the first time he had gotten this close to Shinohara. Shinohara kept on vaguely smiling. Why? Was that really a smile?

Shinohara fixed his eyes on Haruhiro. He saw his reflection in their slightly pale irises.

But, for some reason, he didn't feel seen.

"We of Orion will request that Commander Mogis admit us into the Frontier Army."

Shinohara still had a smile on his face.

But it was only superficial, wasn't it?

This man wasn't smiling.

"The Commander won't reject us, I'm sure. We'll be working together from now on. It will be a pleasure, Haruhiro."

Afterword

Because this is the final arc, I've started changing up some things starting with the previous volume, like the logo, the style of the cover, the way I write things. I've been experimenting. What do you think? I intend to keep refining things more and more to make the experience even more enjoyable.

Now, about the two short chapters following this afterword, #1 is something of an epilogue to 14++. #2 is, well, what is it, I wonder? I feel like it includes some elements that make it like a preview of the next volume. Whatever it is, I think you should read it after finishing the main story.

To my editor, Harada-san, to Eiri Shirai-san, to the designers at KOMeworks among others, to everyone involved in production and sales of this book, and finally to all of you people now holding this book, I offer my heartfelt appreciation and all of my love. Now, I lay down my pen for today.

I hope we will meet again.

Jyumonji Ao

#1 The Wolf and the Masked Man, Under the Moonlight

“Damn it, damn it, damn it! It’s started already...!” The masked man sprinted. Racing as fast as he could, despite being out of breath.

He was headed towards an Alterna in flames. The masked man had returned, finally, to Alterna. It wasn’t an emotional moment. He didn’t have time to get sentimental now.

The walls were already breached. Ladders leaned against them, and the guys from Forgan were climbing up one after another. He could kill every single one of them still within reach, and it wouldn’t make a shred of difference. It would be suicide, too. There were a lot of skilled fighters in Forgan, even if not all of them were up to that same level. If he ended up against a bunch of the more talented ones at the same time, not even the masked man could get out of that alive. The masked man was bold, but not reckless.

His feet slowed, but didn’t stop. As he was jogging along, he caught his breath. When you get to the masked man’s level, you can even nap while walking. Without being able to force himself to rest like that, he wouldn’t have been able to survive. It just goes to show you how harsh his situation had been.

“Personal Skill, Flickering Body, Severing Space.”

He moved quickly, blending in with the guys from Forgan as they climbed the ladders. Even once he reached the other side, they didn’t realize the masked man was not one of them. For a time, he had been, after all.

Flames rose from buildings all over town. However, many of the buildings, especially here in the North District, were made of stone. It wouldn’t turn into an inferno. Forgan didn’t mean to raze Alterna to the ground. They intended to sow chaos by setting fires, then go to work.

For Forgan, that was all this was: work. Jumbo, their leader, might have been an orc, but he was different from other orcs. He, at least, didn’t discriminate

based on race. Forgan's ethics turned on one thing: whether a person was with them, or not. To them, comrades were family. Forgan was their ultimate home.

That said, even if they had chosen Forgan as their place to die, the homelands they were born into were a different matter. Not all of them were orphans. If they had living relatives, they wouldn't just forget them. In particular, despite having long since grown into a kingdom, the orcish race placed tremendous value in their old tribes. Even if they had to abandon the village of their birth for some reason, no small number of them still had an unbreakable bond with those of their flesh and blood.

That was exactly what had dragged Forgan into this battle.

The masked man had gone to the trouble of capturing one of Forgan's orcs to question him. Dif Gogun, king of the orcs, was generous to those who obeyed him. But he had no mercy for defiance. Abductions, threats, and torture were specialties of his. Taking someone's relatives hostage to make them do his bidding was a common tactic for him. King Dif even maintained a massive camp just for those hostages.

No small number of Forgan's orcs had fallen victim to these underhanded methods. Would he join King Dif? Or would he abandon his comrades' families — which was to say his family's families — to die? That was the bitter decision Jumbo had been faced with.

This isn't like him, the masked man thought, but he wasn't a member of Forgan, so it wasn't his place to say so.

The masked man was wise, and so he was well aware that he didn't have the power to stop Forgan.

So... What am I doing? What do I want to do? What is the point?

For some reason, the orcs and undead of Forgan were gathering at the end of the road that led from the north gate. Was someone there taking them on?

It had to be a volunteer soldier.

Could it be? thought the masked man. Could it be what? Someone he knew? It wasn't impossible. But so what? What did it matter if he knew them?

What, can't I be curious?

He could push his way through the members of Forgan to get there. That would be a stupid plan. So, what was he going to do instead?

The buildings on this street weren't burning. He didn't hesitate. The masked man raced up the wall of one of the buildings. Looking out over the area from the roof — there they were.

A volunteer soldier. With long hair. It was a woman.

“...!”

The masked man clawed at his chest. If he could have reached his heart, he might have clutched it and squeezed.

He nearly called out her name. Only barely managed to stop himself. She wasn't the only person below him. There was another. A human, not an orc, nor an undead.

A one-armed man was fighting her. Was it a duel?

The woman only had two large knives. Meanwhile, the one-armed man was wielding a katana.

“That bastard...”

What did he think he was doing? His opponent was just a woman. No, but that old man wasn't into tormenting women. Actually, while he might not show empathy to the weak, he never went out of his way to harm them. He must have decided that, woman or not, she was good enough that she needed to be cut down. Even if the one-armed man also had only one eye, he was a good judge of people.

“Does that mean she got stronger? But still...”

She threw her knives away. Was that deliberate? What could she do barehanded? As she moved in, the old man started to move his katana.

“Behold my secret technique.”

Not even the masked man knew about this. What was with the way that his katana was moving?

It was dancing. Or perhaps scattering, even.

“Fall Haze.”

She charged the old man, as if lured in. No, she was actually being lured in. The old man’s katana had mesmerized her.

What the hell are you doing? What are you doing to her?

At this rate, she’s going to get killed. No, even that old pervert wouldn’t go that far. Yeah, no. He would. He could. Not that I’ll let him.

“Personal Skill!” The masked man drew his katana and leapt. He fell straight at the old man.

“Great Foul Waterfall...!” The masked man’s katana struck the old man’s blade hard.

“Ngh...!”

The old man lived up to his reputation, managing to keep his grip on the katana even as it was almost thrown from his hand, and still take a swing, even if it was an awkward one, at the masked man.

“Why you...!”

“You’re losing it, old man!”

The masked man twisted out of the way of the old man’s blade and took a swing of his own. Old man Takasagi managed to block it somehow, but not in a good enough position. He was falling apart.

“Orah, orah, orah, orahhh...!”

With attack, after attack, after attack, the masked man pushed, and pushed, and pushed. But even with such a massive disadvantage from the start, Takasagi wasn’t just any old man. He was blocking, even if imperfectly. Dodging by a hair’s breadth. He hung in there, endured, and looked for an opening no larger than the eye of a needle to attack.

I know you, thought the masked man. How many times do you think we’ve fought?

Takasagi was weak against attacks that came in from his lower left, and

responded to them a little more slowly. Even so, if the masked man only targeted there, he would adapt to it in no time. Takasagi was only a little worse at handling attacks from that angle. It wasn't a fatal weakness. So, the masked man needed to mix in other attacks, too. Feint like he was going to attack that weak point, then not do it. Then, when Takasagi thought, *What, you're not going for it?* he would.

"Damn... it...!"

Takasagi backed away. He wasn't launching a counterattack. No, it was more than that. He couldn't. The masked man had Takasagi on the ropes.

"Oorah!" He aimed for the lower left.

"Tch!" Takasagi deflected it with his katana. No, that wasn't it. He'd been forced to do it.

The masked man held his katana with both hands.

"Personal Skill! Flying Lightning God...!"

It was a two-handed thrust. How many of them could he do?

Don't think about it. I'm gonna surpass my limits.

Give it to him.

"Ohhh?! Ohhhh...?!"

Takasagi instantly released his limiters, too. The masked man could tell. If he didn't do it, he was finished. That was what Takasagi had decided.

Whoa.

Just how many defensive actions had Takasagi performed in that one compressed instant? The masked man unleashed eight thrusts. His katana connected with Takasagi's a total of four times. He had severed two hairs on Takasagi's head. Takasagi had one scratch on his right cheek.

That was all.

The masked man had sincerely been going in for the kill. To end this here. That was what he'd meant to do.

And this was the result.

Takasagi fell flat on his ass.

And yet the bastard was smiling.

He knew that if he took off his mask, he would be, too. The masked man had goosebumps. He rested the flat side of his katana on his shoulder.

“Get up, old man.”

Takasagi rose without putting on airs. He cleared his throat, and laughed out loud, like he was having a blast, not embarrassed in the slightest.

“You just pop up everywhere I go now, don’t you? You sure can run your mouth now, Ranta.”

“You...! Don’t say it! I’m hiding my face for a reason...!”

“It’s obvious, and you know it.”

“N-No, it’s not!”

Ranta glanced behind him. She was looking at him.

Her face looked awful.

It was a mess, covered in scratches, filthy with blood and sweat, and, to top it all off... she looked like she was crying, too.

Ranta immediately looked away, facing forward again.

“You can move, right?”

“...Y-Yeah.”

“Good. Then come with me.”

“‘Come with me’...?” Takasagi pointed his katana at Ranta incredulously. “You’re running away, Ranta? That’s taking me way too lightly. Do you seriously think you can get away in this situation?”

“No, *you’re* underestimating *me*.”

Under his mask, Ranta smirked, sheathing his katana. He grabbed as many of the knives, razors, nails, stones, and more that he kept under his cloak as he could.

“Personal Skill, Violent Wind of War Debris...!”

He leaped, spinning, throwing the knives, razors, nails, and stones at Takasagi, the orcs, and the undead. It was easy to describe, but actually doing it was pretty tough. Ranta had been convinced that someday the time would come to use this technique, so he had practiced hard. This was the payoff.

“Wha— Damn it...!” Takasagi batted a knife away.

By that point, Ranta had landed, and was running.

During his Violent Wind of War Debris, Ranta had found a weak point in their encirclement. He dashed between and past two orcs. Drawing his katana again, he made it look like he was going to slash the undead now in front of him, but instead got up close and pushed it over. He didn’t need to turn back and check. Yume was following him. Better than that, she was beside him kicking over orcs and undead, or tripping them. Damn, that woman could do some nasty legwork.

“You’re the best...!”

“Nuhh?! What’s that you say?!”

“Nothing!”

“Ranta, you...!”

Takasagi howled like a beaten dog. He sounded just a little happy.

You’re creeping me out, old man. Don’t worry. I’ll snuff you out myself one of these days. That’s what you want, right? You wouldn’t want to go senile and not see death coming, to die after being weakened by a long time sick, or to just not wake up one day. I know that sort of easy death isn’t for you.

In the end, you want to be satisfied that, yeah, this is what’s gonna kill me.

If possible, you want it to be at the hands of a guy you trained.

Were people prone to thinking that way when they felt themselves going into decline? Ranta wouldn’t know yet. But when the time came, he’d give Takasagi the death he wanted. Not now. That was still yet to come. It might well be tomorrow, but it wasn’t today.

Once Ranta totally broke through Forgan’s encirclement, he went down an alleyway.

“You’re not winded, are you?!”

“What about you?!”

“You seem fine. We’re getting out of Alterna for now!”

He wanted to look around Alterna, get a grip on the situation. It wasn’t like he couldn’t afford to take the time. But Ranta’s instincts were already telling him this was a lost battle. Alterna would fall. Staying in the city would only be dangerous. Ranta could manage on his own. He’d be able to figure things out. But... Yume was here, too.

The north gate must have been broken through, but there would be guys there to target anyone trying to escape. Meanwhile, the walls weren’t the main battleground anymore, and there was hardly any fighting going on there. From the inside, there were a number of staircases and ladders that could get them up on the walls, and once they were up there, it was easy to get down to the other side.

Ranta and Yume headed toward the forest in the north. Just before going in, Yume turned to look back at Alterna.

“Let’s go,” Ranta said, pulling Yume by the arm. She didn’t resist.

The deep darkness of the forest was Ranta’s ally. Though he fought entirely using his own unique style, he was still a dread knight to the core. Darkness was his friend. Suddenly, he had a thought. What had happened to the lords of the dread knights’ guild? Knowing them, they’d fight to the end, even if the battle was sure to be unwinnable. They would go into Skullhell’s arms, having fought to their hearts’ content.

Ranta realized he was still holding Yume’s hand, having never let go of it. No, it wasn’t that he forgot to. He’d never forget.

Why? Why isn’t she getting upset, and telling me to let go?! If she won’t do it, I can’t let go. Have some common sense. Not that common sense ever had anything to do with me.

Come on, say something.

All he could hear, aside from the chirping insects, was Yume’s breathing, and

both of their footsteps.

“...Hm?” Ranta came to a stop.

“Ah!” Yume gulped. They heard something immediately after. Was it a dog?
Or a wolf, maybe?

Awoooooo... It was a weak howl. It was the first time Ranta had heard one like this, but the same was apparently not true for Yume.

“Master! Is that you, Master?! It’s Yume!”

“Ohh! I knew it was you!” He heard the man’s voice in the distance.

“Who?” Ranta asked as Yume effortlessly shook free from his hand.

“Yume’s master from the hunters’ guild! His name’s Itsukushima!”

“...O-Oh, yeah? Hold on, aren’t you getting a bit too excited?”

“Well, that’s ‘cause Yume’s happy!”

Ranta was confused to find himself a little irritated by this. He didn’t know this Itsukushima guy, but he’d been aware that Yume was pretty attached to her master at the guild. Of course she’d be happy to find out he was all right.

It’s nothing to get pissed off over, he thought. Yeah. Not for a super tolerant guy like me.

Soon, a bearded hunter appeared with eight wolf dogs in tow.

“Master!”

Yume gave Itsukushima a tackle hug, and though he staggered backwards as he caught her, the guy went and hugged her back.

“O-Oh, Yume, I’m glad. I’m so glad you’re okay...”

“We got split up, y’know? Yume was gettin’ real worried.”

“I was worried about you, too, of course, but I had these little guys to think about. So I got out of Alterna for a while...”

“You’re talkin’ about the wolf dogs, right? They’re all here, huh?”

“O-Okay! Enough already! You two can stop getting all clingy with each other

now!”

Unable to take it anymore, Ranta pulled Yume and Itsukushima apart despite himself. Yume wasn’t happy about it, but it seemed like Itsukushima felt Ranta had just done him a favor.

“Listen, Yume. I was planning to search for you before making any other moves, but it looks like I don’t have to anymore. I’m going to the Kurogane Mountains.”

“Hoh?” Yume cocked her head to the side. “Crocodile Maw Dens...?”

“It doesn’t even sound like that!” Ranta didn’t know whether to laugh or be irritated. “It’s the Kurogane Mountains, not the Crocodile Maw Dens!”

“Well, that’s what it was soundin’ like to Yume.”

“...The dwarves’ Ironblood Kingdom is in the Kurogane Mountains.”

Ranta didn’t need Itsukushima to tell him that.

“So? You know a dwarf there, or something?”

“One of my few friends, yes. Gottheld. He can be difficult, but he’s a good guy.”

“It sounds like you’ve got more in mind than rekindling old friendships.”

“Yeah. The way I see it, Alterna is going to fall. I’m sure the elven capital, Arnotu, must have been taken out like the rumors were saying, too.”

“You can take it from me, it was.” Ranta grumbled. “...Not that I want to be the bearer of bad news. I was in the Shadow Forest the day Arnotu was attacked.”

“...Oh, yeah? In that case, the Ironblood Kingdom will be next. The Kurogane Mountains may be our last refuge.”

“You’re going there to warn them, then?”

“There was a time when man and dwarf fought to the death together. Obviously, it’s not my problem, but... I wouldn’t want to just take this lying down.” Itsukushima looked at Yume. “What do you want to do? Will you come with me?”

“Yume...” She hesitated, as if unsure, then looked straight at Itsukushima and shook her head. “...won’t go. Ranta’s with her, after all. Besides, there’re more comrades we’re gonna be wantin’ to meet up with still.”

“Is that so?” Itsukushima looked disappointed, but also relieved. He was probably both. The man was forthright with his feelings.

“Pay your respects, boys.”

When Itsukushima gave the order, the eight wolf dogs gathered around Yume. They licked her face, and sniffed and pawed at her all over, but Yume seemed really happy about it.

“Mrrowr. Take care, wolf doggies. Nyeheheh, see you later, Poochie.”

“Hey,” Itsukushima addressed Ranta. “Take care of Yume, would you?”

“I’d do it without you telling me to.”

“...Try to think how I must feel, having to act all serious when I’m saying this to some weirdo who’s hiding his face behind a mask.”

“Heh.” Ranta shifted his mask up to his forehead. “Just relax, and head off to the Kurogane Mountains, or wherever. ...And take care of yourself, man. Yume’d be sad if you died in a ditch somewhere.”

“Yeah. I’m good at surviving.”

Itsukushima barked a short order at the wolf dogs and gestured for them to get in a line. The largest, and probably oldest, of the dogs was the first to go, vanishing into the dark woods.

“Poochie...” Yume seemed to want to say something, but reconsidered, deciding she shouldn’t get in the wolf dog’s way.

The wolf dogs kept going, and Itsukushima followed. It had to be deliberate that he didn’t say goodbye. When Ranta thought about Itsukushima’s feelings, he felt something clutch in his chest. Yume respected and adored that bearded man. Ranta might not have liked the fact that she did, but he knew Itsukushima must not be a bad guy. He couldn’t bring himself to hate him.

Yume was silent, even once Itsukushima and the wolf dogs had completely vanished. Ranta considered asking, *Was that okay?* but decided against it. He

didn't have to check. Yume had stayed because she was okay with it. She'd chosen to be with him. Well, it wasn't like Ranta couldn't have gone along with them, but he and Yume had other things they needed to do.

"...The question is, what now?" Ranta mumbled to himself, and Yume laughed.

"Yume's thinkin' it'll all work out somehow. She managed to meet up with you, after all."

"Heh..."

He was about to reply, *You've got that right*, when the reality that he was alone in the dark with Yume hit him, and he started to feel real antsy.

"Wh-... What should we do? Alterna's, well, you know, and it may not be a good idea to try and do anything right away... Besides, you're injured, and probably tired, too..."

"Yeah. It's gettin' dark out. And it's night, too, you know? Maybe we should rest a little."

"S-Sure. That makes sense. Yeah. M-Me, too. I'm not exhausted or anything. I mean, I'm a tough guy, so I'm fine, but resting can be important. Yeah..."

"Guess we're sleepin', then," Yume said, and immediately lay down.

"H-Here?! So suddenly?!"

"Ahhh. Yume, she can sleep anywhere. The ground's not too hard here, either."

"...W-Well, I can sleep anywhere, too. I'm a real man of steel, you know..."

Ranta lay down on the ground, too. He'd slept on windswept cliffs while exposed to the rain. Compared to that, this was like a comfy bed.

"You, uh..."

"Nuh?"

"...Nah. Forget it."

He had loads of things he wanted to say, but if he started asking questions now, there'd be no end to it. Wasn't he going to rest? Yeah. He needed to

recover a bit. Both body and soul. That was his first priority. What were they going to do next? He could think about that later.

“Ranta.”

“...Hm?”

“It’s kinda...”

“Yeah. ...What is it?”

“Your paw.”

“...Huh?”

“Oh, oops, your hand.”

“What about my hand...?”

“Hnnngh.” Yume’s hand brushed Ranta’s. Then she grabbed it. “Yume was hopin’ she could hold it like this. ...That okay?”

“It’s—” Ranta stopped breathing for a second. Then he took a short, deep breath. “...It’s fine by me. No big deal.”

“Oh, yeah? Thank goodness...”

Yume looked awfully sleepy.

Ranta was wide awake.

Hey, now.

Come on...

Doing this? In this situation? There’s no way I could sleep, right...?



#2 The Monster Whispers

A short guide with eyes the color of black tea, almost red, led the way up a spiral staircase. Shinohara knew that the staircase itself was a relic. Because if it wasn't, then what else could it be? These stairs, which seemed to be made of something other than iron or stone, went round and round, upward and upward, in an open space that was neither bright nor dark. With nothing resembling walls. Just the spiral staircase.

The stairs, which had seemed endless, came to an abrupt stop, and they emerged into what appeared to be a forest. He looked up, but there was no sun, no moon, and no stars. Instead, there were globular lights hanging from the branches, or placed on top of stumps.

The guide turned back to speak to him. "The master awaits you."

Having curtly informed him of that, the guide tried to leave, but Shinohara couldn't help but call out, "What's your name?"

"Alice."

"Is Sir Unchain a good master?"

"He's the kind of person who'll turn you into a monster if you trust him. Not that I think he's a person at all." The guide smiled faintly, then warned Shinohara, "You'll become a monster, too, soon enough. I think I already am. Or at least halfway there."

With that said, the guide departed. Shinohara was forced to walk around the top floor of the Forbidden Tower, looking for its master, by himself.

The master was sitting in an armchair, his hollow eyes focused on the book that lay in his lap. Shinohara was surprised to see that his high, wide-brimmed hat was not on his head, but on the floor at his feet. Next to the armchair was a tree, the inside of which had been carved out to create a bookshelf. The interlocking branches above formed a cage, imprisoning a half-naked woman inside.

“You’ve come, have you?” Sir Unchain closed his book, and turned his face towards Shinohara. If you could call what he had a face. Well, it probably was. The man looked like a drowned corpse raised from the depths of the sea, but his long, curly hair and beard were full of life. Every single hair looked like it might begin thrashing around on its own at any second.

“We managed to secure our participation in the Frontier Army. I thought I would come pay my respects.”

“It will be reassuring to have you there.”

Sir Unchain rose from the armchair with awkward but silent motions, returning the book to the tree bookshelf.

“What did you make of him? How was Commander Mogis doing?”

“He’s in high spirits. The man seems serious about becoming king.”

“A king, hm?”

When Sir Unchain raised his right hand, a white staff appeared from somewhere and flew into his grasp.

“Eventually, the No-Life King will awaken, and stand before all kings.”

“Where is it that your liege sleeps?”

Sir Unchain — which was to say Ainrand Leslie — let out a strange sound that might have been a chuckle, but did not answer.

“Who... are you...?” the woman imprisoned in the tree asked quietly.

“I am called Shinohara,” he replied with a smile, and the woman repeated his name with hollow eyes.

“Do you... know... who I am...?”

“Yes. Just a little.”

“I... don’t... Only... my name...” The woman shook her head. “...Dark.”

Had she summoned it? As if pushing through an invisible door in front of her chest, long black threads appeared, weaving themselves together. In no time, they had assumed humanoid form.

“That’s...” Shinohara’s eyes widened. It was magic, surely, but not a kind he had ever seen before.

“Stand back,” Sir Unchain growled. Shinohara did so immediately.

This Dark, or whatever it was, let out bizarre noises, whirling counterclockwise as it got bigger.

The cage of branches splintered. The woman fell.

For an instant, Shinohara questioned whether he should swoop in and catch her. But, no, it wasn’t necessary. Dark was holding her.

The woman descended with Dark wrapped around her.

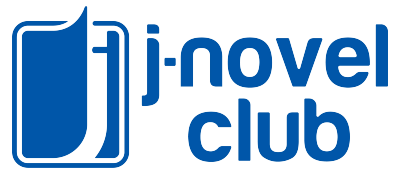
As if she had sprouted wings of darkness.

“I am... Shihoru... I only know my name... and Dark... but...” The woman glanced at Sir Unchain. “He says if I do as I’m told... I can go home...”

“That is correct.” Sir Unchain always spoke honeyed words in a curt tone.

It was as if this monster had no feelings of his own.

“If our goal is reached, you will be able to return home to your world. The world you came from. The place you ought to be.”



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Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash: Volume 16

by Ao Jyumonji

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Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by OVERLAP

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English translation © 2021 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: January 2021